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HIS SECOND
VENTURE

Mrs. Baillie Reynolds

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HIS SECOND VENTURE

BY *Gertude M. (Robins)*
MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS



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HIS SECOND VENTURE

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CHAPTER I

SWEET HOME

RITA KNIGHT sighed and stirred reluctantly among her close-wrapped furs as the outline of the coast of Dover grew distinct through the sleet. She was, in some directions, a clever woman; all her life she had succeeded in obtaining the thing she wanted; but her present desire—the offer of Colonel Caron's heart and hand—she had not achieved, although nobody could, or in fact did, accuse her of not having tried.

She could not plead lack of opportunity, since they had travelled together from India, and there existed between them that link of old acquaintance and old regard which is so strong among Anglo-Indians. She was now journeying to England, widowed, to rejoin the little daughter whom she had not seen for ten years. The colonel, a newly-made widower, was on leave, but due to return to the East as soon as he should have set his house in order.

With all her mind, soul and strength, Rita was determined to get back to India if she could. When she envisaged her future in England, living as a

nobody, on narrow means, either in a maisonette in West Kensington or in the remote country village wherein her young daughter now awaited her, her heart turned to water within her.

Colonel Caron was distinctly well-to-do. His Martershire home was within easy distance of town . . . and before he settled down therein, would intervene two or three more blissful years in India, with money enough to live in real luxury. . . .

Of course, three ready-made children constitute a bit of a handicap, particularly when they are the children of so detestable a woman as Blanche Caron. Rita had already decided that this should be her answer if any friends were spiteful enough to hint surprise that nothing definite had resulted from the intimacy of the voyage. "Oh, yes, Carfrae Caron is a dear; but three of them—and my own girlie as well! These mixed families are difficult. . . ."

What a mercy for poor Carfrae that Blanche was dead! One never expects a woman of that kind to die. These nerve cases usually live for ever. It was some years since the lady in question had accompanied her husband to India. After the birth of her third child she had retired to Martershire and the sofa, giving, as she told her friends, all her time and attention to the wonderful task of training young minds. Her death was quite unexpected, the result of an accident; everyone surmised that the feelings of the widower must have been those of pure relief.

It was, however, very recent—even more recent than Mrs. Knight's own bereavement. Perhaps, even in these unsentimental days, it *was* too soon for an actual proposal of marriage.

Rita had sincerely mourned Jack Knight, not merely because he had been a most indulgent husband, but because his death left her shorn of almost all that made life pleasant. A heartfelt sigh escaped her as she watched her ayah tying up a bundle on a seat near. Hired for the voyage, this woman was taking the next boat back with another lady in charge; and Rita was dolefully considering the misery of putting on her own boots and arranging her own hair.

Colonel Caron came strolling towards her, his coat collar turned up, his manner preoccupied.

“Well”—he winced from the wind-driven, icy sleet—“old England welcomes us in her own imitable style, doesn't she?”

There was something very moving in the appealing gaze of the beautiful eyes lifted to his. Rita was, in fact, three years older than the youthful colonel, rapidly promoted during the war; but she did not look her age. They made an elegant, harmonious pair; her slim height could be seen as he raised her to her feet, steadyng her against the gusts with light fingers on her arm. Her thirty-eight years might well have passed for twenty-eight, so unlined was her face, so wavy and brown her thick hair.

“So it's over,” she said. Her voice, always

musical, quivered on a note of touching poignancy. "The warm, sunny chapter of my Indian life has passed! Now for the rigours of an English winter in the north!"

"You are going straight to Grendon?" he asked with a touch of compunction. A shade of softness veiled his usually hard light-grey eyes.

"Oh, I must! My little girlie will be counting the minutes——"

His jaw set grimly. "That so? I don't see my own little lot yearning for my company. However, we must hope for the best. Ah! We've stopped! Here, ayah!"

"No, don't call her, please; find me a porter. She is going to Folkestone to find the memsahib with whom she returns to Calcutta."

"Why, but that leaves you alone for all that long, cold journey."

"I must get accustomed to being alone," she replied, averting her face and flinging into her voice that brave quiet which makes so strong an appeal to the mere man.

Caron's well-cut face looked hard, and he had the reputation of being difficult to handle, though during the voyage he had, as people said, eaten out of Rita Knight's hand. Yet she had failed, and she knew it. What she did not know was by how narrow a margin she had failed. Her words and her smile moved the man horribly. His exterior might be adamant. Within he was a mere mush of sentiment. Had there been time—had the two had

privacy at that moment—this story might never have been written.

The gangway was, however, down and the first-class passengers already surging forward. The two moved along in the crowd, and each with different feelings knew it to be too late. Her regret, his relief, were alike silent.

Mrs. Knight's large quantities of personal luggage and effects were all registered through to Charing Cross. She had nothing to do but to secure a corner in the train, which the colonel did for her, and brought her a cup of tea and the first English newspaper. Then he shut her into her compartment and strolled away, murmuring that he must travel up with a certain General Cobb, who was an influential friend of his.

That was final. As the train ran through the murky February landscape her spirits sank and sank. She was plunged in depression when at last she saw the mean platform of Charing Cross looming dimly through an unwashed kind of atmosphere, yellow and stagnant.

On that platform was a man whose face she knew well. He was Lyndsay Eldrid, an artist who had spent a cold weather at the station where her husband was in the Woods and Forests Department. He was running eagerly beside the train, his face alight with welcome; and suddenly she remembered that he was brother to Blanche Caron, and was obviously there to meet his brother-in-law. She had seen a good deal of him during his visit to India,

and he had acknowledged her hospitality with the gift of a beautiful water-colour sketch of her bungalow and garden. She remembered his having told her that when in England he lived with his sister at Archwood, Caron's house in Martershire, not far from Marterstead.

As he ran beside the train he was waving his hat, and his mop of fair hair, worn rather longer than is usual, struck a note of gaiety in the gloom. It seemed hard to Rita that Caron, a man, should have this jocund greeting at his journey's end, when she, the woman, was so utterly alone.

She was standing up, reaching for her bags in the netting and wondering whether, with the train so full, a lone female stood any chance of a porter, when she heard a merry voice, "Hallo, Mrs. Knight!" and saw both Caron and Eldrid at the door of her compartment.

"Carfrae tells me you came over in his boat! Lucky blighter! There's never a really charming woman on the boat I travel by! It's awfully nice to see you again! Give us those things. What time's your train? We want you to come and lunch with us, won't you?"

Her spirits rose. She had a gleam of hope. Caron, she thought, could hardly commit himself until he had been home and had reviewed the position of things at Archwood. But he did not mean to let her slip. She smiled, the pretty smile not too wide, carefully calculated, which men thought so womanly, and looked wistfully at him.

"But, dear man—this moment off a journey—look at me!"

"I do, and I like looking," cried Eldrid, declaring that they would take no refusal.

She suffered herself to be persuaded. "I've two hours before my train leaves Euston," she owned, "time enough to be thoroughly miserable all by myself. So if you'll let me have ten minutes before a looking-glass, and if you'll swear not to land me at the Ritz, but in some small nook in Soho where daylight never penetrates, I'll risk it!"

"Off to your mirror, dear lady, but don't let it keep you too long, as I should certainly do in its place," laughed Eldrid, who seemed extraordinarily exhilarated. And in a quarter of an hour she found herself in a taxi with the two of them, being driven towards a certain Italian restaurant which was the young man's special fancy.

"And where is it you're bound for?" he wished to know. "I forget exactly where your country place is."

Rita laughed softly. "My country place! Doesn't that sound nice and important? Unfortunately my cottage at Grendon is an unmarketable white elephant. It is in Westmorland, but *not* in the lake district. Nothing can more forcibly explain its hopelessness. If we could but move it twelve miles nearer Ulleswater we could let it for fabulous sums in the summer. But it is nowhere near any place you ever heard of. You could hardly fancy there was so lonely a place in England. It belonged

to an old aunt of Jack's, and she left it to him with a few hundreds a year. I wanted to sell it, but he had memories of childhood there, and always looked forward to ending his days in it; and certainly it has proved an ideal spot for Val to be brought up in."

"Val? Your child? I thought she was a girl?"

"So she is. My husband's mother was called Valeria. That seemed to me too alarming a name, so we compromised on Valery. She has been at Grendon most of her life, in charge of a devoted Miss Kirby who used to be Jack's governess and adores the Knight family. We thought her a heaven-sent boon when we were faced by the necessity to leave Val in England."

"Well you might! You probably have no idea how lucky you are! My poor sister could never find anyone strong enough to cope successfully with our young devils; and now that she is gone chaos is come again! I tell you I never was so pleased in my life as when I saw this old chap's ugly mug grinning at me through the carriage window."

"Yes, you looked absurdly pleased."

"Pleased! It isn't the word. I've been carrying on here the whole winter. Picture it! The bachelor uncle! I can tell you, those imps of darkness have put it across me! I had to engage a governess; thought I'd be careful, and took one who said her age was forty—owned to forty, mark you! I considered that safe. But not a bit of it! She waves her hair and powders her nose, and wears jade

jumpers and skirts to her knees! She expects one to provide her with chocolates and flowers, and would like to be taken out to dinner and a theatre! I tell you, I tremble for Carfrae."

"I don't think he'll be in much danger, from your description," laughed Rita. "He can take care of himself as well as you can, I should think."

"Nevertheless, the lady sounds perilous," said Caron gravely. "I think I shall dismiss her and send the whole lot to school."

"If you can get any school to take 'em," said their candid uncle. "They are the limit, I tell you! Poor Blanche was bitten with all this Montessori stuff, and the consequence is they can hardly read; you never saw such ignoramuses. Aster, the eldest, is nearly eleven, and she told me she had never heard of Julius Cæsar!"

"You are not concerned to praise your nephews and niece," observed the colonel with a wry smile.

"Oh, I believe they'd have been quite decent average kids if they hadn't been brought up to consider themselves youthful prodigies and to believe they are the centre of the universe. They have been told that they must be a law unto themselves! They want taking in hand, that's all. Why, Lance is nine, but if you sent him to a good prep. school he'd have to go in the bottom form with kids of seven. That's why I thought they'd better have a governess first; but she can't make 'em learn!" He chuckled to himself. "Aster says that Miss Lane's aura is antagonistic to her," he said mischievously.

Rita smiled gently, looking sympathetic, but not too much so. "They are evidently very original children," she said, "as one might expect with such a mother. Well, you might do worse than take on my dear old Kirby, for I don't suppose I shall be able to afford to keep her. I suppose she is a bit old-fashioned now, but she was first-rate. My husband's sister, Esther Knight, is Principal of St. Frideswide's, the newest Women's College in Oxford, and Miss Kirby educated her until she matriculated. . . . But I expect Colonel Caron will soon reduce things to order. . . . At any rate, colonel, if things get too tiresome, you can always come to Grendon for a little rest. Whatever faults the place may have, it is at least full of tranquillity; and I would love you to see my little girlie."

CHAPTER II

RITA'S DAUGHTER

SO Valery's mother is coming home at last!" Arrives to-night, so Miss Kirby tells me," remarked Mrs. Hudson as she entered the vicarage dining-room and pulled off her gardening gloves in preparation for helping the vicar to cold mutton.

"To-day? Dear, dear! We must go round to-morrow and pay our respects," replied the vicar, lean, elderly and stringy-looking. "Well, she'll find her daughter a good, sensible, well-brought-up girl, won't she?"

"Just what old Miss Knight would have wished her great-niece to be," was the almost defiant answer. "Not many of that type to be found nowadays."

The vicar cleared his throat. "I do trust that Mrs. Knight may settle down here. When last I saw her she seemed to me regrettably frivolous; but since then she has known bereavement by the inscrutable decree of Providence."

"Humph! Let us hope for the best!" broke in his wife absent-mindedly. She was gazing from the window, out beyond the imperfectly tended garden, across a little valley to the lift of a wooded hill on whose southern slope stood an unassuming white

house with a green veranda and green shutters. It was placed near the top of the hill, on whose flank the trees had been cut away to make open spaces of park land, with a few clumps. The figure of a tall woman could be seen, clad in a long rusty old coat, moving upwards from the valley towards the white house.

"There goes Valery; been down to feed the fowls. She's a quarter of an hour late to-day. Most unusual! How excited she must be feeling!"

Mr. Hudson adjusted his glasses and gazed pensively at the homely figure. "Ten years since they met, and Miss Kirby says Mrs. Knight still writes as to the little girl she left behind her." He chuckled guiltily. "Won't it be a bit of a shock?"

"It's very certain," rejoined the lady frigidly, "that the girl's size can't be altered."

The subject of these remarks had now reached home. She pushed open the door of the garden-room with her knee, shut it behind her with her heel, and proceeded to lay down her empty dishes, to pull off her old coat and her goloshes, and to hasten away upstairs with an impetuosity which made the banisters rattle. Having reached the square landing at the top she paused, a smile hovering on her lips, and pushed open the door of the best bedroom.

It was ready for its guest. In all its Early Victorian primness it stood there, its great mahogany "tester" bed covered with a dazzlingly white mar-

cella quilt, its serviceable brussels carpet swept to the final pitch of dustlessness, its wardrobe giving back each gleam of light and scenting the air with beeswax and turpentine.

Valery looked at the bed. It seemed incredible that "mother"—her beautiful dream mother—would that very night lay her head upon that pillow. Would she perhaps—who knew?—suggest that her "girlie" should share her bed? There was plenty of room!

Val took off her spectacles and polished them, for her eyes were misty. Almost timidly she approached the dressing-table and scrutinized its spotless cover, its bare appointments. What did it lack? Why, flowers, of course. When lunch was over she would run down the park to the Holt Clumps and gather snowdrops.

As she stood motionless, rapt in happy anticipation, all was so still that she could hear the singing of the beck in the hollow. It did not strike her as lonely. It was her life, and she had been always happy—perhaps the happier for the possession of two dream parents and the treasured hope of a life of glorious reunion. Upon her love for these parents, and theirs for her, all her simple philosophy of life was based. But they had never formed part of her experience, and her grief for her father had been chiefly a grief of the imagination.

When she and the faithful old Miss Kirby had eaten their rabbit and rice pudding, they went together into the drawing-room—a room only used

by them on very rare occasions—to light the fire that the room might be thoroughly warm for the traveller.

As the governess's gaze wandered round, the apartment struck her suddenly as being both ugly and cheerless. All at once she saw it, as it were, with Mrs. Knight's eyes; and as she wondered how it would appear to her, she also, for the very first time, wondered what impression Valery herself would make upon a stranger, and a little pang constricted her kind heart.

Valery was stoutish and clumsy and big. Her spectacles made her look older than her age. Her thick mane, plaited in one long rope and coiled in a lump behind, was taken too abruptly off a forehead that needed shading. She wore a flannel blouse, short serge skirt, thick stockings, square-toed shoes. . . .

No thought that anything in her own appearance could lessen her mother's love had ever crossed the daughter's limpid mind. She was not at all shy, eminently sociable in fact, and she beamed through her glasses as though she found in the universe something new, something splendid, because of her coming joy.

"I know what this house wants—flowers!" cried she. "Why, Kirdles, there are genistas and primulas in the greenhouse. I'm going to bring some in!" She dashed off, with Josh, her Aberdeen terrier, barking at her heels, and Miss Kirby stared after her with furrowed brow. She had done her best for

her charge. Why was she now, for the first time, assailed by the thought that a whole generation had elapsed since her last post, and that her present pupil had been modelled not upon to-day, but yesterday?

Such was the daughter who swooped down upon the slim, sealskin-clad figure which alighted that night on the platform of the lonely moorland station, enveloping her in an embrace which seemed to be that of a giantess.

Rita gasped. Heavens! Could this be true? Was this her girlie, this strapping woman in spectacles, choking with emotion, trying to speak, hanging upon her with absolutely no doubt whatever that her joy in the meeting was reciprocated?

Rita was feeling low enough to have responded gladly to any advance had it come from the charming flapper whom she expected to see; but this great Flanders mare. . . .

“Never!” was her cry. “I can’t believe it! My wee girlie . . . it’s like a nightmare!”

Poor Miss Kirby’s voice, repeating piteously “a nightmare!” recalled her to herself, and she did her best to play up to the occasion, to return the tearful kisses, to express joy in this reunion; but the effort exhausted her last remnant of fortitude, and when at last she entered the Grange she was conscious of nothing but a fatigue so vast as to be like annihilation.

There was a blazing fire in her room, and the

quality of the hot coffee and sandwiches provided left nothing to be desired. She pleaded headache, the necessity to be alone; and when Valery, crushed and disappointed, had unwillingly retired, she sank down in the cavernous arm-chair in which old Miss Knight had died, and tried to face this final disaster which had overtaken her.

This was her daughter. She was saddled with her for life. No husband would ever take this mistake of nature off her hands. "And she used to be quite a pretty child!" she murmured, as if expostulating with an invisible tyrant.

The word encumbrance was the only term of description which would come to her. What man would be likely to marry Rita, if at the price of having Valery as an inmate of his household?

When at last the returned traveller sank to sleep in the convolutions of the feather bed, it was with a despair that was ready to throw up the sponge altogether. Life had grown too ugly.

Breakfast-time filled the little house with wintry sunshine, an odour of hot bacon, new bread and coffee.

Certainly English food is delicious! Under its influence Rita began to find something humorous in the situation. Gazing ruefully upon the uncompromising proportions of the ungainly girl, she remarked: "You should have been a boy, Val. You are absurdly like your father."

"Yes, indeed, she is like darling Jack," eagerly put in Miss Kirby. "She is like him in disposition,

too; I can't give her higher praise. I loved him better than anybody in the world."

"What a dear, faithful friend you are, Kirby," murmured the fair widow. "What would many people give to have a creature like you to leave in charge of their darlings! My old friend Colonel Caron, for instance. He has to go back to India; has lost his wife; his children are being ruined for want of a firm hand."

"But Kirdles," said Val quickly, "can't be spared from here, can she, mother?"

Rita sighed. "We shall have to count our pennies, darling. Things will be different now that father is gone." A dismayed silence followed this bomb-shell. Val, cruelly conscious of her mother's disappointment in her, now felt that if the steady and unfailing love and approval of Kirdles were to be taken away from her, life was going to be a hard thing.

"By the way, Kirby," went on Rita, "tell me something about a man who lives somewhere hereabouts—a tall, untidy man, not very young, with the initials O. J.?"

"O. J.?" queried Kirdles. "Why, that must be Sir Otho Jerrold, the M.F.H."

"Ah! He looked like an M.F.H. somehow. What's his wife like?"

"He isn't married. Such a pity! If he had been, he might have had children, and Val would have had someone to play with. He lives at Grendon Manor, our only neighbour within miles."

"He tumbled into my carriage at Oxenholme," said Rita thoughtfully, "and we had some talk. He is good company."

Miss Kirby looked doubtful. "The vicar doesn't get on with him at all," she volunteered. "Mr. Hudson fears his views are lax."

"Meaning that he can't be bothered to go to church, I expect," said Rita abstractedly, little knowing the shock of this remark to the listening girl. "Well, we must ask him here. How are we off for servants, Kirby? Could we invite a man to lunch? What is there in the cellar?"

Miss Kirby, crimson, dare not glance at Val, whom she had warned that her mother's mourning must preclude all gaiety for a while. The fact that Rita wore nothing remotely resembling weeds had, as it were, hit the good lady in the eye to begin with.

"I've never been into the cellar since we came," she owned. "Whatever was there is there still, I suppose. As to service, we have Mr. and Mrs. Pearce and Nellie——"

"The child who brought my early tea?"

"I do hope she did it right?"

"Oh, yes; but I should think we need another maid—someone who could wait on me."

"Oh, mother, let me wait on you!" burst out Val, aching with devotion and loyalty. "I simply love waiting on people."

"But, my child, I hope you'll be otherwise occupied; besides, I think you need someone to wait on

you—especially to do your hair." She tried to speak playfully, but the criticism with which her eyes wandered over the unsightly head was to Val all the more excruciating because unspoken. "Some girls can never do their hair—temperament, I suppose," with a deep sigh.

Miss Kirby, bristling with championship for her nursling, interposed: "Val hasn't had much practice yet. She has only just put up her hair. I am sure she could arrange it better if she were shown how."

"Only tell me," sobbed the big creature, casting herself at her mother's feet. "I'd do anything in the world to please you."

"Well, girlie, that's everything," was the gay rejoinder, as Rita's fingers removed half a dozen rather horrible hair-pins and let a shower of light hazel-brown hair, clean and silky, fall about the heaving shoulders.

"Straight as string," she muttered. "All the Knight women had straight hair. It's a pity, because you are doomed to wave it all your life, poor child! . . . So, then, the first things that need attention are the cellar, the parlourmaid, and my daughter's hair. How far is it to Manchester? Girlie, I think we shall have to buy a little car. Do you suppose you could learn to drive?"

Val's doleful face broke into wide smiles. "Oh, mother, do you mean it? Why, I'd sooner drive a car than almost anything."

"Darling," her mother repeated mirthfully, "you certainly ought to have been a boy!"

CHAPTER III

WIDOWERS' HOUSES

IT was April. A tearing madcap wind was rolling over the ploughed lands, buffeting the coppices and shaking the red buds on the burgeoning trees. In the sunshine two horses stood on the gravel sweep in front of the house known as Archwood, a Georgian house of good type, built of sober, plum-coloured brick, with red window dressings, and a charming pedimented doorway.

Lyndsay Eldrid, already mounted, awaited his brother-in-law. His brows were knit as he tried not to listen to the sounds from the hall within of raised voices, of screams of temper, and then of cries of a different quality, evidently those of a child undergoing punishment.

Presently through the open doorway came striding Carfrae Caron. His jaw was set, his face haggard; he looked both enraged and ashamed. As he flung himself on his horse Lyndsay noticed that he was trembling slightly.

Neither man spoke a word, but they turned their horses and rode off down the drive, past the plantation, out upon the Winstable road, which they soon abandoned for a lane debouching on the other side, among whose windings they speedily found them-

selves out of sight and sound of earth-shaking lorries and hurtling cars, in a deep and rural solitude.

At last Caron broke silence. "It's enough to drive one to drink. Life's not worth living. And what am I to do? I've got to go out again in June. I shall have to shut up this place and send those mismanaged imps to some home for the derelict young who are cursed with fathers in India."

"They want a thoroughly good woman to handle 'em," sighed Eldrid. "They're not bad kiddies if someone could put the fear of the Lord into 'em."

"Yes, but where are you going to find her? How many thoroughly good women are there left in this worn-out country? Nice specimens we have managed to collect, anyway. If they even had a nurse one could trust!"

"Blanche sent away old Nannie because she said her methods were too completely reactionary."

"Reactionary be d——d! She'd have kept 'em clean, seen that their habits were regular, drilled 'em into some kind of routine! I'm helpless!"

"This daily governess—Mrs. Jennings—is not so bad."

"No, but the house is pandemonium the moment she turns her back! If I forbid anything, they tell me that their mother never forbade them to do anything. I went into the library last night, past eleven o'clock, and there, if you please, was Aster curled up on the sofa reading *Anne Veronica*. Said her mother always let her sleep downstairs if she preferred it. That I believe to be a lie. I don't think

even Blanche would have gone to bed leaving the children strewn about all over the house."

"I never remember such a thing. Afraid Aster always was a bit of a liar."

"I had to carry her upstairs, kicking and screaming. It humiliates me! It makes me sick! But worst of all was what she said when I got her into her room and ordered her to put herself to bed. Would you believe it, Lyn, she said: 'Now I begin to see the charm of this brute-force idea. I could love and obey a man who did what you have just done to me.'"

"Jove!" was the uncle's awestruck comment.

"It's unnatural, it's foul; the echo of something she has picked up without understanding it from one of those so-called advanced novels." He wiped his furrowed brow. "I'm fairly up against it," he groaned.

"You'll simply have to marry again, old chap."

"No, by the Lord!" Caron made a gesture of forcible negation. His experience of matrimony had been blighting. Blanche had looked so fair and was such a whitened sepulchre! Her language was so high, her character so low! In his extreme youth—he married at three-and-twenty—he had worshipped her long white throat, her misty hair, her big vague eyes that seemed to hold a secret. The secret was soon learned. The image enshrined in those mysterious eyes was nothing but self, writ large. Blanche was one of those egoists who must supply themselves with some plausible reason for self-wor-

ship. She invented a legend of her own high aims and intellectual superiority; but she had no high aims and no intellect. She lived upon catchwords and current phrases, culled from the pseudo-scientific cult of the moment.

"No, not again," muttered her husband. "Forgive me, Lyn, I expect it was quite half my fault that our marriage was such a failure; but a failure it was, to an extent that makes me hate and shrink from the idea of repeating it."

"Well," replied Lyndsay calmly, "the man who marries a woman of Blanche's type is simply asking for trouble. But all women are not alike, really, you know, old sport. And the only way to attach a woman permanently to the interests of the house of Caron would be to marry her, wouldn't it?"

"If one could just give the lady one's name, and then sheer off and leave her here to carry on, it might be thought of," was the ironic rejoinder; "but such an arrangement would call for the exercise of a tact I don't possess. . . . I wonder if Mrs. Knight could make any suggestion. I've got an invitation in my pocket from her to go up north and take one of the kids with me."

"Well," deliberated Lyndsay gravely, "she wants to marry you, Car; I suppose you're aware of that; but if you took Aster along she might be weaned from that desire. All the same, think it over. You might do worse. She's a charming woman, not without means; but there's a ready-made daughter, isn't there?"

"About Aster's own age."

"H'm! Perhaps it might be a bit awkward to introduce them. You'd have Mrs. Knight bringing an action against you for corrupting the morals of her young and innocent child."

"Oh, don't talk through your hat," replied Caron impatiently. "Mrs. K. isn't the sort of wife you could leave behind. She wouldn't see that at all. . . . But I'm so incredibly fed-up here that I think I shall go to Grendon for a short visit. I'll take Lance. He's the best of the three. And as it is he and Aster who fight so diabolically, perhaps you could manage for a week or ten days, Lyn? I daren't go if you're not here. Mrs. Jennings might come for longer hours while I'm away."

"Oh, if you remove one of those two, I think the roof will stay on all right," laughed Lyndsay. "But take my word for it, you'll come back a doomed man! A fi-pun' note on it!"

"Done!" said the colonel quietly. "I resisted her during the whole of the voyage home, and I think I can now. Besides, I had a letter this morning from Cobb. When I was at the W.O. the other day he mentioned to me that they are actually sending out an expedition with military escort into the Chugga Desert to test the truth of the story of the secret city at Hal-i-Mor; and his letter practically offers the command to me. One would have to look forward to the best part of two years, apparently, and, of course, I can't do it unless I leave the children well looked after. . . . But didn't Mrs.

Knight, when she was lunching with us, say that she had just the kind of person I want, up her sleeve?"

"Jove, now you mention it, I believe she did."

"Well, suppose I can persuade old Nannie to come back to us—I believe she would for me—secure this treasure, and send off Lance to a preparatory? Then I might accept the Chugga thing, which would be just after my own heart. If Mrs. Knight knew that I was contemplating doing that instead of going back to India, I don't think she'd be at all keen. Grass widowhood isn't her line."

"I don't suppose it would be; and you'll be a lucky devil if you pull off the Chugga command. Think I'd go with you as sketch artist to the expedition—offer my services free! But beware, all the same; go slow with the fair widow. After two months in the wilderness she may be feeling a bit desperate."

CHAPTER IV

A TEMPERATURE

THE rain, which had all day descended in torrents, ceased to fall at about four o'clock. By six the skies were blue and the radiance of an English spring was creating new heavens and a new earth. Carfrae Caron, in the train, felt his spirits rise. After all, he was young—still on the sunny side of five-and-thirty—and it was years since he had seen the mountains of Cumberland rising from the rolling, sun-kissed mists.

The exasperation of his irritated nerves began to subside. It had been a hateful business getting away. He had not foreseen Aster's jealousy at being left behind, nor the difficulty of equipping Lance for the visit. There seemed to be neither suitable clothes nor trunks in which to pack them. This morning the boy himself, after indulging for the past few days in an outburst of wild spirits, had given way to causeless tears, had refused to eat, and during most of the journey had sulked, half asleep, awakening in his father's mind the most dismal forebodings as to the impression he would produce at Grendon.

When the mountains came into sight, however, Lance began to sit up and take notice. He gazed

at the distant summits and asked their names. When at last the little local train into which they had changed set them down in the wild moorland, Caron was boyishly conscious of a sense of adventure, of affronting the unknown, the wild, the mysterious. He wished, as he sprang lightly to the platform, that he was coming to meet youth—that Rita Knight were not so mature. He felt absurdly young, and looked it, from his clear eyes to his light-stepping feet, from his thick hair, untouched by grey, to his fair military moustache.

As he glanced round he was approached by a tall lady chauffeur, correctly attired in mole-coloured corduroys, and wearing her livery with some distinction.

"Is this Colonel Caron?" she asked frankly. And as he owned it: "I'm Valery Knight. Mother sent me to meet you. I've got the car outside. Will you please show the porter your luggage?"

Caron shook hands. "Mrs. Knight's sister-in-law?" he ventured, a trifle puzzled.

She laughed. "Her daughter."

"Her daughter!" Carfrae was so surprised that he said nothing at all. His brain spun. The image of Rita Knight suddenly slipped away into a long alley of antiquity down which he had no intention of following. She must be older than he—older than he had any idea of!

"Is this Lance?" went on Valery, friendly and conversational. "How are you?" She shook hands with the boy. "You can't think how I've been look-

ing forward to your coming," she told him. "I like boys, and I never had a brother. Do you fish? There's quite a decent trout-stream in our garden."

Still talking, she led the way to the smart little car. "You sit by me, and the colonel can go behind," said she to Lance. "I've not long learned to drive, but I've been thoroughly taught. I do all my own running repairs."

They swung off northward towards Lowther, Caron ridiculously annoyed at being seated behind, as if she considered him an old gentleman.

"Mother sent many apologies," she presently told him over her shoulder. "She wanted to come herself, but was playing off a round of golf. You'll find her at home, I hope; Sir Otho Jerrold said he'd bring her in his car."

They rushed past a tantalizing glimpse of Hawes Water, and plunged into ferny lanes redolent of spring. Every breath he drew seemed to Caron to be definitely perfumed. So through a garden-gate that stood open to the doorway of a house set in clumps of daffodils and hyacinths, whereat stood Mrs. Knight, charmingly got up in a black and white golfing suit and smiling a cordial welcome.

The room into which she led her guests was full of the scent of flowers and of pretty Indian things, the carven brass showing well against walls of dim blue. Although it was so late, tea stood awaiting the travellers, and in a low chair sat extended a long, bony man about five years older than Caron—a man with a short auburn beard and piercing red-

brown eyes, which flickered over the face of the new-comer as though fearing a rival.

Rita introduced the two men, with a thrill of deep satisfaction. "Sir Otho," she said, "is a godsend in this desert place, and he's staying to dine to-night in order that you may have a man to talk to. He puts up with the vicar's bridge and our cottage cookery!"

"As you may guess, all that Mrs. Knight does is done to perfection," responded Jerrold lazily. "Well, you had a wet journey, but I think the weather's taking up. The wind has gone into the right quarter, the glass is rising, and the moon is waxing."

"Oh, how nice of you to prophesy that!" cried Rita. "This place is nothing in bad weather; we do want to show off a bit while Colonel Caron is here. Where are you off to, Val?"

Val, her hand on Lance's shoulder, paused at the door.

"Just going to show Lance the pony and puppies before it gets dark."

The two whisked out and could be seen a minute later running past the window in animated conversation.

Caron half wished he were with them, for the triangle formed by the lady and her two cavaliers was not altogether congenial. Sir Otho, in rather a marked way, held the talk upon the subject of a golf tournament in which the new-comer could take no interest; and presently Caron murmured excuses

and went to see that his son and heir was clean and had brushed his hair.

He found Valery, dressed for the evening, just completing the unpacking and tidy bestowal of the boy's things in his spotless little bedroom. Lance was chattering as if he had known her all his life. His cheeks were scarlet and his eyes very bright. Miss Kirby, who was hovering about, put in a shy word. She thought the child over-tired with his journey, and suggested tucking him up in bed and letting him have some supper there instead of coming downstairs. Lance, in a highly excited state, burst into tears at the suggestion, whereupon Val sat down beside him on the edge of the bed, hugged him, and promised not only to bring up his tray but to come and read him to sleep. To his father's unmeasured surprise, he instantly fell in with this suggestion, and forthwith began pulling off his jacket.

"But," expostulated Caron, "I can't let Miss Knight be bothered like this." Kirby turned her wise old eyes to his.

"She likes it better than any pleasure you could offer her," said she gently. "She is full of love and has never had anybody upon whom to lavish it."

The father yielded, and went off to do his own changing with a feeling of being suddenly relieved of a load of responsibility.

He descended to the drawing-room, well-groomed and fit, a rival to stir feelings of discomfort in the breast of Jerrold. Only Rita, however, was present

as he entered, and she turned from the glowing fire which lit up her soft grey draperies most becomingly, and held her hands to him with a gesture of more than cordiality.

"Let me bid you welcome again," she said. "You are part of my old life—the dear, vanished life of India! When you get back to Simla you will meet my ghost wandering about there!"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I'm not sure that I *am* going back there," he answered bluntly. "I am nursing a wild idea of going off into the wide on a pioneering expedition—if I can get my family looked after. By the by," he added hastily, "Miss Kirby and Miss Knight have put Lance to bed; they think he's overtired. I hope Miss Knight won't consider herself bound to worry about the kid."

"She's perfectly happy," said Val's mother swiftly, "with a boy, or a puppy, or even a rabbit."

"Not many girls left of her type, are there?"

"Not many—fortunately for their mothers. Oh, Colonel Caron, what *am* I to do with her? For, of course, I must face the fact that she'll never marry."

He faced round. "Not marry! Why not?"

"My dear man, *look* at her!"

He hesitated. "Men don't all marry for looks."

"Perhaps; but very, very few of you marry *in spite of looks!* Oh, you need not spare me! I have no illusions about my unfortunate girlie. She's out of the running for the matrimonial stakes, but fortunately she won't be miserable in consequence."

She is a contented creature. I think she was born to be the matron of an orphanage."

As Caron turned, upon the entrance of Sir Otho, he wished he could place this *rara avis* in charge of his!

After dinner the vicar came in to make a fourth at the bridge table, and Miss Kirby, to her unutterable relief and thankfulness, was left free to sit with her knitting, swiftly fashioning a jumper for Val.

Rita had just leaned back with a delicate sigh. "Ah, partner, if you had but opened hearts, they would have been two down!"—and Mr. Hudson had irritably retorted, "Not at all; Jerrold had another trump;" to which her rejoinder came instantly, "Which made both my diamonds good; he would have *had* to lead a diamond," when the door opened softly and Val put in her head.

"Kirdles dear, do you know where Trickle is?" she asked.

"My dear"—with a start—"what do you want Trickle for?"

"For Lance. I am quite sure he has got a temp.," said Val quietly.

Her mother stared, turning her beautifully dressed head towards the door. "What on earth is Trickle?"

Kirdles rose, driving her long pins through her ball. "Val's baby-name for the clinical thermometer," she replied as she hastened away.

The colonel pushed back his chair. "I suppose,"

said he, in accents of bitter resentment against fate, "that I had better go and see."

"No, wait; it's probably some nonsense of Val's," was the consoling rejoinder. And the deal proceeded.

In a few minutes, however, Miss Kirby returned, and her face was very grave.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I fear your little boy is really ill, Colonel Caron. He is 104, and his breathing seems much oppressed. Val is changing in order to go for the doctor. I don't wish to alarm you, but it looks to me like pneumonia."

CHAPTER V.

A NIGHT RUN

COLONEL CARON looked up swiftly, flung down his cards upon the table and left the room, followed most reluctantly by his hostess.

Lance was a very handsome boy, in a somewhat effeminate style. He looked bewitching with his rumpled curls and scarlet colour as he lay tossing from side to side, breathing in hurried gasps from the top of the lung, and babbling short, disconnected sentences.

"But, mother—surely, mother—if it was wrong to fight, my father wouldn't be a soldier," he wailed out.

Caron coloured hotly. "Delirious," he muttered, "poor little chap! All right, old man; don't you worry!"

"It's the fever makes him talk," murmured Miss Kirby gently. "He ought not to have travelled to-day."

The colonel made a quick sound of exasperation and helplessness. "My fault, I suppose. I saw he was a bit off colour," he muttered; "but a man doesn't understand children, and these have been encouraged to think about themselves till you never know whether a thing's real or whether they're spoofing you."

The door opened very quietly as he spoke. He

looked up and saw Valery standing there, attired in her chauffeur's garb.

"I'm just off," she said in lowered tones, "to fetch Dr. Bell. I'll have him here in an hour. Meanwhile, Kirdles knows what to do. I had pneumonia once, and she can make a poultice."

"Miss Knight, do you suppose I can permit this?" interjected Caron, rising and striding to the door. She laughed.

"It isn't a case of your permission, I'm afraid. The doctor has got to be fetched, and I know where he lives and can bring him back with me."

"Surely there's someone you could send?"

"Nobody but me can drive the car," she answered, turning her back and walking off.

He pursued. "Then I'm coming with you."

"Why, there isn't a bit of need. Oh, I don't know, though, perhaps there is. You could jump out and open gates for me, could you not? That saves time, and besides the two drive gates there's one right across the road, half-way up the dale."

"Of course. Wait while I get a cap and a coat."

"Right! Then if you don't mind coming round to the garage, we'll start from there, to save time."

Of all things that Caron could never have foreseen, this, that he should be rushing through the purple, star-sown night, with a girl at the wheel of the car, was surely the wildest. And such a girl! So unlike all one's dreams of girlhood—so big and stout and matter-of-fact, so capable and business-like.

As he was borne along he found himself finally bidding adieu in his heart to what he now realised had been his half-formed intention of marrying Val's mother. Rita was evidently no matron for his orphan asylum; her attitude towards the present crisis told him that. Let her marry Jerrold. He would be her master; looked as if he might beat her, should occasion arise.

"Why didn't we roll up Lance in blankets and bring him with us?" he presently demanded. "There's sure to be a hospital or a nursing home in Ulleswater."

"Oh, why do a risky thing like that? He's all right at Grendon."

"But the trouble to your mother——"

"Kirdles and I will see that mother is not troubled," was the brief reply. He thought the girlish voice hardened as with scorn.

"You're a trump," he murmured, and she laughed.

"I'm glad you think so. I love boys, and Lance seems such a nice boy. I'm sorry I rushed him round so when he came, but I could not know he was ill. I'd never seen him before, and thought that high colour was natural, till Kirdles came and looked at him. I do hope it didn't do him much harm; but he'll make a splendid recovery in this air—you see if he doesn't."

The simple assurance was encouraging. He felt, moreover, a curious confidence in this girl's capacity. They were threading a lane so narrow that the brambles on either side brushed their wheels; yet

he watched without nervousness the radiance of the strong head-lights upon the fern-fronds and grass as they ran smoothly, though sinuously, on.

"You drive well," he presently told her.

"This is a kind of pass—a short cut. Shouldn't dare drive mother here; but I know these lanes like my alphabet."

"You like driving?"

"Love it. Mother says I ought to have been a boy. I like tinkering with machinery. The village carpenter and I have just been fitting all our house up with electric bells. I would install light, too, if mother would buy an oil engine; but she won't, because she doesn't like the Grange—doesn't want to stay here."

"You like it?"

"Oh yes, it's my home. Now that I've got this car I like it more than ever. Queer thing. I've always liked animals, gardens, children, machinery. I've always had the first two, now I've got machinery—and Lance as well for a while at least. If it were not such a fiendish thing to say, I'd confess that I'm half glad he's ill, as I shall have him all to myself."

"But I must engage a nurse."

"Nonsense. Here are Kirdles and I, one for night and one for day. Don't you do it, unless Dr. Bell says it's absolutely necessary. Here we are at his house. Open the gate, please."

As he dismounted to do her bidding, he sighed. This was the right stuff. A pity Nature had wrapped it in so unattractive a package!

CHAPTER VI

THE FATAL KISS

IT was double pneumonia; aggravated, as might be expected, by the exposure of the patient to the draughts and fatigues of a long journey while in a feverish condition.

There descended upon the Grange an atmosphere of anxiety—of hushed suspense—that rapidly deepened into alarm.

Caron was ashamed of himself because he was conscious of so little affection for the sick child. Were there to be no recovery, he had a humiliating suspicion that Valery, the stranger, would feel it more keenly than did he, the father. His own son! . . . A horrible thought.

"What is the matter with me is that I'm a hard-hearted brute," he told himself. "That's probably why Blanche and I couldn't hit it. I must be without natural affection."

Yet, with human inconsistency, he found himself condemning with disgust the unfeeling attitude of Rita, who kept aloof from it all. "I'm of no use at a child's sick bed—never was—never had any practice," she murmured. And Caron had to put constraint upon himself not to inquire of her what practice her young daughter could have had, which had turned her into an expert.

He did not reflect that the contretemps was really very hard upon Rita. The last thing she had expected was to have sickness in the house. She fled from it, and went golfing with Sir Otho.

Pneumonia is an alarming complaint to watch. It needs both courage and resource in the nursing; the crisis, however, comes speedily. The whole thing is short and sharp.

Dr. Bell, secure in his knowledge of Miss Kirby and her pupil, did not insist upon a professional nurse.

When he came twice on the second day, and, after prolonged silent observation of his patient, made an excuse about distance and accepted Caron's only half-serious offer of his own bed for the night, the father felt that the outlook must be grave indeed.

By Miss Kirby's advice, Mrs. Knight was not told that the doctor was remaining in the house. "She would only fuss because there is no room to give him," said the good woman simply. "I'll find you some rugs, Colonel Caron, and you must do as you can by the schoolroom fire."

"You know how gladly I will do anything to lessen your trouble," was his fervent assurance.

All that night he kept drowsy watch, dropping off in an arm-chair from time to time, then rousing himself to creep on tiptoe along the passage to the half-open door of the sick room, wherein, during all those long hours, the tension seemed never to relax.

Val's schoolroom was upstairs—snug, sunny and shabby; the room in which she and Kirdles had lived

so comfortably together; in which canaries sang, puppies were reared, sick chickens nursed to health, story books read through long winter evenings. . . . The colonel took down a well-thumbed copy of "Black Beauty," and smiled over some of Val's childish marginal notes.

At about four o'clock he returned from a fruitless reconnaissance. It revealed no change in Lance's condition, which he knew to be critical. He was, however, so overcome with weariness that he threw himself down upon the soft old sofa, dragged over him the eider-down quilt with which Miss Kirby had supplied him, and yielded to overpowering somnolence.

He was awakened by a low sound, which at first he could not identify. Was it the hard, terrible struggle for breath which had so distressed him on his last visit to his son? The noise persisted; and as he grew more fully awake he knew that someone was sobbing, quite close to where he lay.

Throwing off his covering, he rose to his slippered feet and looked about him.

Daylight was filtering into the room through the drawn blinds—the clear, sunlit radiance of a May dawning. The birds in the park were pouring out a regular Peer Gynt symphony of heart-moving music.

Crouched and huddled into the big chair by the expiring fire was a figure in a dark red flannel dressing-gown, over which hung a long rope of glistening hazel hair. It was Valery, crying her

heart out, and evidently quite unaware of his own presence.

His heart moved in his side as if physically. It was over, then. Lance was dead.

His son. The heir of his name. To a normal father, such a boy would be the very apple of the eye. To him Lance had been little more than a nuisance—something to be disputed over with Blanche as to education and all kinds of training.

And now he was gone. He had swiftly escaped into some wider world, from which, perhaps, he might look back and examine critically his father's attitude towards him.

Oh, marriage was the very devil . . . and fatherhood was worse. Nevertheless, it was he—he and not that big-hearted girl—who ought to be shedding those tears.

Trembling with emotion, he bent down over her and laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Miss Knight—is it—is it—is my boy gone?"

She sat upright with a great start, grasping the arms of her chair. She could not rise, because he was stooping right over her. Her face was flushed, tears lay upon her cheeks; in that moment she seemed transfigured into something which to him was very like beauty.

"Oh, no—no! I'm crying for—happiness!" she gasped. "He's asleep—his skin's acting—at last, at last! Dr. Bell says he'll—do—now!"

"Thank God!" The words came from some

fundamental deep in Caron's being. "And I owe it to you. You plucky girl—to you!"

As naturally as he might have kissed Aster, he took the quivering face of Valery between his hands, and, bending his handsome head, kissed her full upon the mouth.

How does Nature send her messages from lips to the very centre of being? And, heaven pity us, why are such messages so often entirely misleading?

The touch of a man's lips, for the first time in all her virgin girlhood, was to Valery Knight, wholesome, simple, loving creature that she was, the Kiss of Awakening; significant as the salute of the prince to the sleeping maid in the wood. In the twinkling of an eye, this man who had been just Lance's father, became an object of mingled terror and desire—a mystery, a fate—with power to set in motion feelings until that moment undreamed-of.

Caron was so carried away by his gladness that he repeated his kiss—twice—thrice.

Had he considered the matter, he would have felt serenely sure that the modern girl attaches no undue importance to a kiss; but he thought of no such thing in the spontaneity of his gratitude. "Let us rejoice together" was the unspoken language which accompanied his action. How was he to gauge the fathomless simplicity, the unsophistication of this girl? Her profound ignorance was mingled with normal, natural feminine instincts, wholly untouched until that moment. To her, the joyful mingling of emotion so new with an event so unprecedented,

brought for the first time in all her healthy life, the sensation of faintness.

An ejaculation which was not quite a cry broke in upon his stammering delight. Jumping as if he had been shot, he wheeled round, to find the schoolroom door standing open and in the aperture the figure of Mrs. Knight, upon her face an expression in which bewilderment struggled with acid displeasure. She supposed at first that her guest was kissing one of the maids.

"Colonel Caron! Who and what—" She broke off, speechless, as Valery's tall form reared itself up from the depths of the big chair. In the literal meaning of the term, Rita was shocked; that is to say, the discovery gave her such a shock that for a minute she could not speak, but leaned her forehead upon her white hand, which clutched the edge of the nursery door.

She was looking her best, being one of those women with a talent for *négligé*. She wore a loose *kimono* of lavender *crêpe-de-chine*, slightly embroidered in pale purple. Her boudoir cap had a bunch of violets in it. The contrast between her and her ungainly daughter had never been more cruelly emphasised.

"What," said she faintly at last, passing her perfumed handkerchief over her lips, "what are you both doing here?"

Caron had collected himself. "You have heard the great news, I expect?" he said, going towards her. "Lance is out of danger, and I—I was trying

to thank Miss Knight, and to let her see how deeply I appreciate her—her heroic struggle for his life."

Rita critically, deliberately, surveyed his attire—a sleeping suit, with coat and trousers over it. He saw her gaze travel from his costume to the tumbled quilt upon the floor by the sofa, so evidently recently in use for sleeping purposes.

"Dr. Bell has my bed," the colonel put in hurriedly, with a sudden feeling of acute embarrassment. "Miss Kirby told me I might camp out here; but I've been up most of the night."

"And has Valery been sharing your—vigil?"

"No, mother." Valery at last spoke for herself, but the ring of excitement in her voice was noticeable. "I did not know Colonel Caron was using this room. I've only just come. I—I rushed in here because I knew I was going to cry, and it would have—it might have—disturbed Lance if I had broken down in there."

"Mrs. Knight! Consider what I owe to her," urged Caron appealingly. "My boy's very life."

Rita's frozen features thawed visibly. Into her face stole an expression of slowly dawning satisfaction as she began to realise what use she might make of the scene which she had surprised.

"Quite so, Colonel Caron," said she softly. "So long as you are duly sensible of what you owe my daughter."

She looked him in the eyes, and they faced one another silently.

He was frightened for a moment, then relief

came. It was too silly—too preposterous. He shot a look at the bowed figure in the red dressing-gown, wiping its eyes with a large, serviceable handkerchief. “Valery——” he began.

Rita moved reluctantly. She felt that matters had better not be pushed further at that moment. In her daughter’s present unbecoming *déshabille* it were wiser to call a truce. She made a step forward. “Come to me, Val,” said she in her sweetest tones, and Val rushed turbulently to her side. Rita passed her slim white arm about the heaving red flannel shoulders. “Come, you must be worn out, girlie. Let mother put you to bed for a while. Colonel Caron, I’ll offer my congratulations on your boy’s recovery later; my girl mustn’t break down as a result of her nursing.”

“By no means,” he stammered, holding the door for their exit and closing it again behind them.

“Well, I’m hanged,” he muttered, flinging himself down on his sofa and preparing to sleep again for a while. “Just because I gave the child a kiss! I was so worked up, it seemed natural enough. . . . But by all that’s chivalrous it would take a good deal to induce me to repeat the experiment in cold blood. My word! One would need some courage for that!”

CHAPTER VII

CARON'S INTENTIONS

IN less than three hours after this emotional episode they were all breakfasting together—that is to say, Dr. Bell, the colonel, Mrs. Knight and Miss Kirby.

The eyes of the last named, as she nervously handled her tea and coffee equipage, were very pink, and her nose swollen—phenomena which Caron attributed to her tender feelings for his boy. He did not guess the cutting reprimand she had received, first for allowing the doctor to remain in the house, unknown to Mrs. Knight, and next for failing to warn Valery that the schoolroom was in occupation.

She made apologies for Val's absence from table. "She begged to have breakfast in bed, for a great treat," she explained. "She has not closed her eyes all night, or last night either, for that matter; and now that the crisis is over she feels the reaction. Mrs. Pearce is watching the dear little patient while I have my breakfast, and will call me if there is any change. I will go and relieve her very shortly."

"I'm glad Val isn't present," observed Dr. Bell genially. "It sets one free to say what one thinks of her. You ought to let her take up nursing as a

profession, Mrs. Knight. She's quite wonderful—a gift!"

"But, then, she does so many other things well," chimed in Caron eagerly. "Look at the way she drives her car—and the way she has fitted this house with electric bells."

"And you haven't seen her on horseback," put in Kirdles, delighted to hear her nursling thus praised. "She is not able to ride now, unfortunately, because old Toby is not up to her weight; but as a child she went everywhere with the hounds. She's her father's own daughter."

"Indeed she is," sighed Rita; "I can't find anything in her that reminds me in the least of myself."

"No," said the doctor deliberately, contemplating the dainty charm of the mistress of the house, "she is certainly quite unlike her mother."

"Kirby must take all the credit of her," laughed Rita; and her laugh was half a sneer.

Caron said boldly: "When you're wanting a job, Miss Kirby, please apply to me."

He was unprepared for the effect of his words. Miss Kirby started quite violently. "Oh, did you mean that, Colonel Caron? No, I suppose you didn't," said she with a gasp.

"Dear Miss Kirby is, as a matter of fact, on the look out for a post," said Rita silkily. "As you may suppose, she has completed her work in Valery's case."

Caron, tossing down his napkin, turned in his chair to face the agitated Kirdles.

"So? Is this possible? Then you and I must have a talk, please, at your earliest convenience, Miss Kirby."

"I know she'll be delighted, at any time that suits you, colonel," put in Rita with vivacity. Her spirits were rising fast. To get rid of Kirby—to have her substantial inelegance out of the way—would be half the battle . . . and then there was the scene of this morning to be worked judiciously, and who could tell what might not eventuate?

She was perfectly well aware that Jerrold would never become her suitor unless or until she was without encumbrances. She knew as well as if he had said so in words that he would never have Valery as an inmate of his house.

But if she could marry Val to Carfrah—ah, what a revenge! All the spite of the small-minded woman towards the man who has resisted her efforts to marry him urged her to try and bring this off. She gazed under her lashes at Caron's hard-cut mouth, and realised that it would not be easy. She must tread warily—drive him with a very loose rein; but if her wit could compass it, driven he should be.

Valery and the colonel met next at Lance's bedside. It was but a momentary glimpse, as far as the father was concerned. He was allowed just to bend down and touch the pallid forehead of the patient with his lips, murmuring something about "Cheerio!" which to himself sounded woefully

forced, but was enough to bring a quivering smile to the lips of the sick boy.

Valery sat the other side of the bed, her eyes carefully lowered. Her sociability, her *camaraderie* seemed to have vanished. The boyish lack of reserve, the friendliness which had in some sort atoned for her lack of sex attraction, no longer existed. What might in a beauty have been a new and adorable shyness was in her an almost grotesque *gaucherie*.

It is difficult to describe the discomfort which Caron suffered in the course of the next few days, even though he had attacked Miss Kirby and secured her promise to come to Archwood and see what she could do with his menagerie.

Rita was, as usual, a gracious hostess, and would hear none of the apologies he felt bound to offer for what he had let her in for. She assured him that the trouble was nothing, since Lance would recover, and that his father was free to stay as long as he liked; but for all that, she found means to make him feel himself so atrociously *de trop* that, could he have put forward any semblance of an excuse, he would have fled.

Not being allowed as yet in the sickroom for more than a few minutes at a time, he was fain to go golfing with his hostess and Sir Otho; and they had to avail themselves of the baronet's car, since their own chauffeuse was otherwise occupied. Caron was wholly unaccustomed to the sensation of being completely number three. At the club they secured an

irascible old gentleman, a most indifferent player, to make up their foursome, and drearily went over the course, in a drizzle of rain, which, ever threatening, never came on freely enough to stop play.

If Rita imagined that she was furthering her own cause by driving Caron to the verge of flight, she was for once utterly mistaken. She soon began to realise this for herself, and to decide that she must put all her money upon Sir Otho. In his masculine density, Caron had but a vague suspicion of the new plan which had formed itself in her mind at the schoolroom door in the dawn.

Various hints made him uneasy, and he was further annoyed by the manner in which Valery fled from him, whisking out of sight the moment he appeared and avoiding conversation.

Enlightenment came a week after the crisis in Lance's illness. They had intended to go golfing, but the rain had set in steadily and prevented it. Sir Otho was on the bench at Penrith; and it looked as if, for the first time that week, Caron would be let in for a *tête-à-tête* with Rita, when the door-bell rang and Mrs. Hudson was ushered in.

The vicar's wife belonged to that class of women whose society seldom gives pleasure to anybody. Carfrae, however, felt inclined to welcome her that day. She was an indefatigable caller, having no interests of her own and being entirely dependent upon her neighbours' concerns to supply the spice of life. Needless to say, the tragically sudden and serious illness of Lance had been a godsend to her, and she had never wearied in her inquiries.

That afternoon she felt herself to be really in luck. Her own husband was also on the Bench, and instead of being compelled to go home to a solitary and scanty tea, she had caught Mrs. Knight and her handsome visitor, and was seated in a room where still a fire burned, May though it was—delightful in the cold, sleety afternoon.

"And how's the dear little boy?" she asked as she took her tea-cup from Caron's listless hand and helped herself to a cake with sugar icing. "So pleased to hear how well he gets on. Valery quite shines as a nurse, does she not, Colonel Caron?"

He assented cordially to this. "Miss Knight has been indescribably good to my boy. I feel quite unable to express my gratitude. She has not spared herself."

"You must have been terribly anxious?"

"For forty-eight hours we did not know how things would go. The doctor remained in the house all night."

"And poor little Val," chimed in Rita's soft voice, "after a sleepless watch, strung up to the highest point, quite broke down; and I don't know what would have happened had not Colonel Caron been at hand to support her."

"*What!*" cried Mrs. Hudson, with a famishing kind of eagerness; "*to support* her? Was she fainting then?"

Rita laughed low and mischievously. "I think Colonel Caron could tell you that better than I can; I only know that I found them——" She paused

a moment, enjoying the man's crimson face and tight mouth. "You see," she began again more gravely, "I also was terribly anxious. The colonel and I are old friends—close friends, may I say, colonel? Yes; and I felt that for his son and heir to die in my house would, as it were, stain or poison our friendship. He would never like to come to the house again."

"Oh, quite so, quite so—yes."

"Well, I got up in the dawn, slipped out of my room, crept softly along to the schoolroom, where the colonel had been sitting up that night——"

"Mrs. Hudson, your cup is empty," broke in Caron sharply. "By the way, I hope the vicar got that map I left at your house for him yesterday?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" Mrs. Hudson thrust her cup into his hands, and held up her own as a sign that he must not interrupt this thrilling narration. "And what did you see, Mrs. Knight?"

Rita chuckled softly. "I saw the dawn, not only of day, but of my girlie's romance, Mrs. Hudson! Oh, I admit I had not been altogether blind; but Val seems such a child, and I did not take into consideration his quite reprehensible good looks and their effect upon my youthful novice! I fear that at first I was not at all pleased. I could not have my precious one-and-only played with. You know what a scar that leaves—a lifelong scar. But Colonel Caron reassured me. . . . Oh, my dear lady, please, *please* understand that there is nothing—yet! This dear man well understands that, with

innocence and inexperience so profound, he must go very slow. So far she is absolutely unconscious, and she must not be hurried; I will not have it. But I know I am very safe with him." She smiled up angelically into his savage, murderous face.

"Mrs. Knight exaggerates, I fear," he growled, like a big dog snarling at a cheeky pup. "Miss Knight regards me as her father's contemporary. I would not be so fatuous as to suppose that she could misinterpret my gratitude for what she has done for me."

"Her devotion to your child will make everything easy, won't it?" cried Mrs. Hudson, waving his denial down the wind ecstatically. "From the bottom of my heart I wish you luck! Valery is a most uncommon girl; the vicar and I have always said so. To see her with her Girl Guides is a revelation . . . with children of her own——"

"Oh, fie, Mrs. Hudson, this is going much too fast; we shall begin to regret having made you our confidante," gurgled Rita. "Now, be sure and remember that this is strictly *entre nous*. Not a word, even to Mr. Hudson. Everyone must shut their eyes and their ears for the present."

"Until when?" cried the disappointed visitor.

"Until Colonel Caron decides that the moment has come for him to explain the reason why he kissed my daughter in the small hours and a dressing-gown," smiled Rita archly.

Mrs. Hudson laughed loudly, rising from her chair. One could see her intention of going to

spread hints of her news in every conceivable direction, propelling her, almost as it were, unwillingly from her comfortable seat and the cosy fireside. She took her leave and hurried off, and Rita saw her to the door, returning to find Caron standing in the window, with hunched shoulders and brooding look. He strode up to the hearth and confronted her. His voice as he spoke was heavy with a cold rage, which all but succeeded in daunting Rita.

"That woman will put it all over the place that I am going to marry Valery."

She shook off her fear of him and faced him with an air of gentle, deprecating surprise.

"Very likely. . . . Are you *not* going to marry her?" She paused, as though an unwelcome thought for the first time intruded itself. "Was my first impression right?" Her tone had changed, and grew haughty. "Were you really venturing to take liberties with my daughter? Ah, I forgot. You thought yourself safe. She has no father to take her part."

A hundred retorts leapt to his lips; he bit them back. He was far too furious to trust himself to speak to her—she, who was his hostess, in whose house his boy had passed through the valley of the shadow. If he opened his lips he knew that he should say what he would regret all the rest of his life.

He turned on his heel and left the room precipitately.

CHAPTER VIII

MAN PROPOSES

MAY was showing for once in a way what May can be in the North Country. The woods about Grendon Grange were a smother of bird cherry, the pale green plumage of the larches waved against a background of black firs like laughing maidens among dark, stern men. The hawthorn perfume drifted on the air, the ferns were thrusting up little clenched green fists; lords and ladies sat within their wayside shrines, the meadows were deep in cowslips.

Lance lay under the veranda upon an invalid couch, out in the air for the first time.

As his father carried him carefully downstairs he had chattered eagerly, pouring out the account of a wonderful new game which Val had taught him to play. You chose a couple of cricket teams, each of you selecting an eleven from the best-known names. Having decided the order of their innings, their places in the field, and so on, you took a book at random from a shelf and turned its pages one by one, the fate of each ball being decided by the letter which happened to come first upon the page. Each letter of the alphabet stood for something definite, such as a run, a bye, a boundary hit, a not out, a l.b.w., and so on.

This thrilling pastime, varied by games of old maid and halma, had kept the patient good and happy for hours on end.

Val followed them down the stairs, laden with rugs and cushions. The colonel took them from her with a very friendly smile. He was not to know that his smile set her heart thumping so heavily that she feared lest he might hear it.

She was looking her best that morning. Only the preceding week the oculist had decided that the glasses she had worn for so long, in order to correct a slight astigmatism, had served their purpose and might be discarded. They no longer disfigured her clear eyes, and her mother, besides supplying her with suitable frocks, had arranged her hair in more becoming fashion. She was still clumsy, too big, lamentably immature, but she was no longer ridiculous nor actively unpleasing to behold. In fact, for anyone with eyes to see it, there was the promise of beauty in her face, the texture of whose skin was as fine as soft water and the Westmorland air could make it.

"You're turning yourself into a slave to this good-for-nothing little beggar," said Caron as he relieved her of her burden.

"She isn't a slave," cried Lance indignantly. "She's as keen on cricket as I am. Why, she plays on the Green every evening with the Girl Guides, and last season they beat a Boy Scout team that was staying at Whitehaven. London chaps, of course, but still the girls must be pretty hot stuff—what?"

"We're not so bad," said Val candidly, busy as she spoke in touching up and arranging Lance's couch for his comfort. "We had a pro. from Carlisle to give us some lessons last season. Now, Lance, on your honour not to kick off the rug. Shall I read you the 'House of the Wolf'?"

"Right-o, old thing! I'll be as quiet as a new-born lamb."

"Lance," said his father, "what a way to talk to Miss Knight!"

"Miss Knight indeed! You don't seem to understand that Val and I are pals for life. Oh, Val, how I wish I could have you always! Of course, it's very jolly to think of Kirdles coming down to Archwood, though I'm afraid Aster'll give her a pretty thin time; but if only you could come too! Father, couldn't Val come and stay with us a good sensible long visit—all summer, in fact?"

Colour which she could not subdue surged into Val's face. Caron did not at first notice it, for he was replying quite calmly. He felt that Mrs. Knight would have to be invited to Archwood, and he had dim hopes that under the management of Kirdles the house might be got into something like order for the event. Consequently he said:

"Well, I hope she will come, as you suggest—and that before so very long either. If she doesn't, it won't be for lack of an invitation." Raising his eyes to smile at Val, he saw that hot, painful blush and wished that he could recall his words. "How-

ever," he added awkwardly, "there is not much time now before I go out again."

"You won't want me when you can run about again and do as you like," Val told the boy, stepping bravely into the breach, but not finding it easy to speak lightly. "Boys don't want girls always after them."

"Humph! From what I've noticed, grown-up men do, though! I shall marry you, Val, as soon as I come of age. Then you won't be able to get away from me; you'll have to come and live with me, wherever I am."

"Wait for you eight or nine years! Miss Knight will be married ages before that," said Caron, once more putting his foot into it helplessly. If it had been possible to grow even redder, Val would have done so; but still she kept her head enough to divert Lance's attention from this difficult subject.

"Do you know, Lance, that Dr. Bell says if he finds you none the worse to-morrow for having been out to-day I may take you a run in the car?"

"My hat! Then we'll go and see Windermere, shall we? And you'll show me the Lion and the Lamb? And you'll get into that jolly rig of yours that you had on the day you met us? I tell you, the minute I saw you I said to myself, 'That's the stuff to give 'em!' I'll tell you something else as well. I believe you could get upsides with Aster."

"Get *what*?"

"That's what old nurse used to say—our nurse that we had when we were little. She used to say

what Miss Aster needed was somebody who'd be upsides with her. You're the only person I've seen yet that would be. Aster's pretty fresh, but I guarantee that if it came to grips between you, you'd end on top."

"Lance, how you do chatter!" muttered his father irritably.

"You're not to talk any more now," added Val. "You are to have a nap. I'll read you to sleep, and then I must run down and feed my chickens. Kirdles has been doing it for me, but it is such a climb for her dear old legs." The words recalled to her another thought. She addressed Caron eagerly. "I hope you have a car at Archwood," said she, "or a trap of some kind for my poor old darling. She walked half over the map of England with my father when he was a boy, and she has walked with me for years and years. Now, though she's very efficient, her walking days are over."

"I'll get a car," said Caron at once. "My wife wouldn't have one—said they jarred her spine; but I'll buy one before I go back to India."

"How nice of you," she answered gratefully, taking up the book to read to Lance.

Caron held out his hand for it. "Give it to me. I can read him to sleep as well as you can, and you can go and see to your poultry. Show me how far you have got, and I'll carry on."

"I'm sleepy," said Lance unexpectedly. "Let me alone here and I shall doze off. You go with Val, father, and carry those great tins and baskets. She's

always lugging about something that's too heavy for her."

Caron stared at his son in dumb surprise. This unwonted consideration could be the result of nothing but a very strong affection. He looked at Val, who bent down and dropped a kiss among the curls of Lance's head.

"On my honour not to kick the clothes off, Val," said the boy, turning away his head and closing his eyes.

"Doesn't care to have me read to him," reflected Caron, with some regret. He shrugged his shoulders and turned to Val. "Now, Miss Knight, let me be useful for once."

After some polite demur Val went into the garden-room, sorted out what she needed, and together they descended the hillside, down the grassy park, in full view of the vicarage windows, where indeed Mrs. Hudson was seated in ambush, watching with all her eyes.

The colonel was silent, for he was reflecting. Rita's move, in telling Mrs. Hudson the story of his most harmless escapade, showed him that she felt that she had her claws into him, and that he could not retire from the scene without some kind of apology passing from himself to the girl. He believed Valery to be quite undeveloped, quite pure-minded, and no more likely than he was himself to attach any serious meaning to the episode. He felt quite certain that his own light and laughing apology would be received with a smile; and he pictured the

relief with which he could go to Rita and say that all was well—that, as he had always assumed, Val looked upon herself as his son's contemporary and not his own, and that she had readily accepted his apology for having acted upon an excusable impulse, not remembering that she was of an age to resent a kiss.

He was inclined to think that the present moment was a suitable one for settling the annoying little business.

He wished to get it done with, so that he could take Lance and himself away; and he knew he would draw a breath of thankfulness when he was out of the house. He had grown to detest Rita, and the thought of poor Val was an embarrassment; but one good thing he had secured as the result of his visit—he was going to have Miss Kirby!

Only one little drop of apprehension lay deep in his mind. He had no idea what Rita had said to her daughter, but he did know full well that Val's manner to himself had completely changed. Suppose—his blood ran cold—suppose that Rita had put ideas into the girl's head?

What a fool he had been just now to speak of her coming to Archwood in the near future—to tell Lance that she would be married long before he grew up. When he recalled her heavy blushes a little needle of discomfort ran through him.

However, the sooner it was over the better. He could so easily disabuse the mind of this good-tempered simpleton of any misplaced ambitions.

She was a good sort, and, thank God, honest. Not in the least like her mother.

When they arrived at the hill's foot they were out of range of windows. There was a thick screen of trees beyond the brook, which ran musically by the boundary of the big wire fowl-run.

The whole thing had been Val's last birthday present from her father. She had the latest devices in hen-houses, trap-nests, and so on; and the brook had been widened and deepened in one place to accommodate her ducks.

Caron helped her to collect the eggs from the nests, watched the scattering of the food, even lifted the ducklings' coop for her, that it might be moved upon fresh grass. He heard also some rather surprising statistics of the profitable nature of the poultry-keeping, remembering the bills handed to him by his stableman for the purpose of purchasing food and other necessaries.

At last Val's tin dishes and the capacious pockets of her apron were alike empty. They turned from the busily pecking throng of birds and began to move slowly along the brookside.

It was now or never. "Miss Knight," he began suddenly, "for days past I've been owing you an apology."

Val started, then hung her head and murmured something inarticulate. It was evident that she knew to what he referred.

"Yes. I find that your mother takes quite a serious view of what I hope you may have regarded

more indulgently." (What a stilted ass I am; why can't I talk to her naturally? he asked himself with inward irritation.) Her attitude was so crushed, she seemed suddenly so utterly cast down that his sole anxiety was not to humiliate her. Some compliment, some conventionally pretty thing, suitable from a middle-aged man to a young girl, that was the idea! He cleared his throat: "You naturally do not altogether realise the—er—the charm of youth to a man of my—er—age. So I trust you'll be forgiving. I—er—it is hardly necessary for me to explain that, when I yielded to temptation and kissed you the other morning, I was not such a conceited ass as to expect—to hope—that you could or would reciprocate my feeling."

Thus with three empty words he decided his own fate.

What he said reanimated the girl as though it had been a draught of champagne. She coloured richly, her lips parted, she began to tremble. Profoundly moved, she stood there before him in all her pathetic rawness, her inarticulate, hardly-born womanhood. "*Your feeling?*" she gasped, springing at the word as at a life-line. "Ah, tell me—please—what *did* you feel for me?"

The man stepped back aghast as those words of passionate craving fell upon his ear. What had he done? He was making an apology, glib, formal, more than half contemptuous; and he found himself staring into the face of something very like tragedy.

In his inconceivable blundering he had allowed

her to suppose that he had fallen in love with her. She was pleading for certainty—wild to know that she was not mistaken—that this wonderful thing was true. The intensity of her eagerness transfigured her as it had done in the dawnlight in the old schoolroom.

She was looking at him with the eyes of a woodland creature caged, which sees its deliverer place his hand upon the cage door.

How could he undeceive her without brutality?

He was so taken aback that he could hardly speak, and his voice might well have been that of a lover very uncertain of his reception, as he muttered something about his gratitude, his affectionate gratitude.

"I—to tell you the truth—I felt almost as though you were my own child," he faltered shamefacedly, saying to himself: "That ought to do the trick—surely that'll finish it—the paternal touch——"

No such thing.

"Your own child!" cried Val with a sob. All in a moment her feelings overcame her. It seemed to her that the affection she craved was hers at last, and she flung out two shaking, red hands, not very clean, in surrender that was almost abject. "Well, so I *am* your own child—your own, if you want me! . . . You know—that morning you kissed me—I felt—oh, I can't tell you *what* I felt, because it's too wonderful, too *holy*. . . . You see, I have been so utterly lonely, till you and Lance came—so dreadfully lonely."

"My dear girl, what are you saying?" In his utter horror he fell back upon the one plea which he felt free to urge. "I couldn't accept such a sacrifice. Surely you see that. Val, you're too young, and I'm far too old for you. You're nothing but a child, and I couldn't make you happy——"

"Oh, it doesn't take much to make me happy," she sobbed, smiling through her tears. She assumed all his disclaimers to be due to depth of feeling, modesty, generosity. He saw that she utterly mistook him, and he knew that it was his own fault. He had bungled the whole situation; and he had a horrible suspicion that he had bungled it past hope of a remedy.

Val had dived into her pocket for a handkerchief to wipe away her tears, and she was proceeding to redden her nose by a vigorous polishing. "I can't believe it," she sobbed out. "It's like a dream, that you and Lance should come into my life just at this crisis, when I was so miserably unhappy: when I found out that mother not only didn't care for me, but that she had never cared for father, either!"

"My dear girl——"

——You know it's true. Even Kirdles has to admit it now. She's going to marry again—that man—I hate him—and I should be all alone if it wasn't—if it wasn't for—you!"

He gazed upon her with a helpless kind of despair.

"You're deceiving yourself," he said harshly.

"Can you really think you would be happier with me—me whom you hardly know—than you are here, in your own home?"

"It's not my own home. Mother's going to sell it. She told me so! It's no use my begging her, for she doesn't love me, she thinks of nothing but looks . . . and yet"—with a rainy smile—"people's ideas of looks are so different, aren't they? Lance thinks I'm the best-looking girl he ever saw. And now—you—you——"

Once more those pathetic hands were extended in absolute confidence to him. It was the trust of the stray lamb hastening to the shepherd, hoping to be safely enfolded.

Caron, inexperienced with women, for all his thirty-four years, was completely non-plussed. He could have held his own against a siren. Anyone attempting to fool him would have received short shrift. But how could he pole-axe this bleating refugee, making so directly for the shelter of his arms? As was most evidently expected of him, he took the hot hands in his own, drew their owner slightly towards him, and, with considerable reluctance, repeated his offence of ten days back. Coldly, with definite distaste, he kissed her forehead, and she instantly dropped her head on his shoulder and shook with sobs.

"Come, come," he murmured inanely. He could think of nothing else to say. He was in what he himself termed a blue funk. That which the mother's wiles and the mother's malice combined

could not effect, the girl's innocence, her astonishingly facile surrender, had brought about irretrievably.

Taking her handkerchief from her he began to dry her eyes. She looked up with a smile of almost fatuous adoration.

"Oh you dear!" she murmured.

"Here, Val, steady on," he gasped, terrified. "You are carried away for the moment, you don't know what you're talking about. When you think it over you'll see that you're quite out of sympathy with me. You're young and I'm not. You're facing a prospect that would freeze the blood of most women—the herding of three mismanaged step-children. Be warned, my dear, in time. Don't fling away your future like this. Let's be great friends; come and stay at Archwood, with Miss Kirby to chaperon you, and forget all that has just passed."

"Oh," she cried, flinging her arms about his neck, "you are good and generous, but you don't understand! You have no idea how much I would do for you, how much I have to give you!"

"Val!" he cried sharply, "I won't take it! I swear I won't! I can't!"

She laughed quite gaily, every word he spoke seemed to increase the completeness of her delusion. "You'll just *have* to take it—you dear!" said she triumphantly; and the unhappy man perceived that he would.

CHAPTER IX

RITA MAKES HER ARRANGEMENTS

BUT you are joking, dear lady—pulling my leg! No, no.. If you want to make a fool of me try to invent something within the range of possibility. This, frankly, isn't."

"However impossible, it's true. Impossible things often are." Rita removed her faultless shoe from the fender-stool and her slim hand from the mantel-piece. Turning, she faced Sir Otho with an expression he could not interpret. "At least, I have my information from the colonel himself."

"You are telling me seriously that Caron—*Caron*—has offered marriage to Valery?"

"He has, and she has jumped down his throat with that alacrity which seems to be the monopoly of the very young girl."

"Girl! But your daughter's not a girl—she's not even a human being of any age! She's an Amœba—a Zoösperm—an amorphic rudiment floating in chaos—"

"Sir Otho! You are speaking of my daughter."

He broke off, staring at her in a sort of angry amazement. "Your daughter," he muttered. "I shall never understand how you came to marry Knight."

"Tom was all right," she cried eagerly. "A fine fellow"—she made a gesture towards her husband's photo—"you can see for yourself that he was. Only he came of a family that doesn't make pretty women. I married him before I saw my sisters-in-law. . . . Poor Val is every inch a Knight, and that old idiot Kirby has exaggerated, cultivated it in her! However," she laughed under her breath. "Need we lament? She is already appropriated. Solid worth has found a customer, little as you may understand it."

"I never disputed the solidity," he muttered, scratching his head and screwing up his features. "But you ask me to believe that a man, sane like Caron—handsome like Caron—well-off like Caron—could look at the Amœba while you were here for him to gaze upon?"

"Oh, well—perhaps you assume too much." Turning away with a smile, she bent her head so that he could not see her face. "Three stepchildren are an obstacle that not every woman would leap, you know."

Otho Jerrold's eyes kindled. "So that's it, is it? I'm enlightened. Came here for what he couldn't get, and in order to even up with you, snatched at the heart of the Amœba! No doubt she proffered it to him on a charger."

"You are not a bit polite to my girlie. Val is a treasure—I have it on the authority of all those who know her best. She is in her element with little boys, and will make an ideal stepmother.

Meanwhile, my poor head is in a whirl, for he goes out again next month, and they must be married at once."

"Where is he now?"

"He left us yesterday, almost immediately after making his announcement—to break his news at Archwood. Judging by what I have heard, I shouldn't wonder if his eldest girl were to put an end to her papa's second venture with a carving-knife."

"You stand there and talk about marriage for the Amœba? *Marriage!* There ought to be an Act of Parliament to stop it. She is about ten years under the age of consent."

"Now you are talking wild nonsense. She is nineteen."

"Well, I suppose you ought to know—but if that is true I should like to know how old you were when she was born."

"If you have impudence enough to ask that you have impudence enough for anything! But I was seventeen." She gave a great sigh. "I, if you like, was under the age of consent. No girl of seventeen ought to be allowed to marry."

She sank down beside him on the sofa, and he took up one of her hands, stroking it gently. "Poor little soul!"

"Well, as it happened, I was all right, because Tom was one of the best. But, oh! When one reflects how utterly a girl at that age is in the power of the man——"

"What about your Amœba?"

"I don't exactly know what an Amœba is, but you are rude to call my daughter names. Oh, she will be all right, I have no fears. Whatever her lot, she will accept it cheerfully, having no imagination and no sense of humour. Carfrae will be able to neglect her as much as he chooses—she won't know any better; and, meanwhile, she and old Kirby will jog pleasantly along and run his house to perfection." She raised her wrist, glanced at the little gemmed watch thereon, and moved restlessly. "Do you know, I fear I must be so inhospitable as to turn you out. All my things have to be packed, and as I have never in my life before packed my own things, I haven't a notion how long it will take."

"You are going away?" he asked sharply.

"But, of course. To town, to buy Val's trousseau. They must be married in London, and then his children can be present at the ceremony."

"And you," he mused, "will be left quite alone, since Miss Kirby goes to the Carons. Were you wise, do you think, to turn Caron down?"

She arched her brows. "Has wisdom much to say in these matters, do you think? Either you can do a thing or you can't. I couldn't. And in London I shan't be lonely. I know heaps of people."

"London?" he took her up keenly. "Then you don't intend to live here?"

"My dear man, how could I?" She laughed at the wild idea. "Do you see me feeding Val's odious cocks and hens—or perhaps playing cricket on the

village green with her Girl Guides? No. I shall sell this house, which I have always hated, and start fresh."

There was a pause. It lasted just long enough to make her tremble lest she had burnt her boats in vain. Then:

"Yes, you shall make a fresh start," he said. "What do you think? Rooms at The Albany, shall we say? I like to winter out of England, and I also like to be here sometimes. What do you say to that? I have no ready-made children, and I can tell you, with my hand on my heart, that until I saw you I had no intention of marrying anybody. Come! Is it a deal?"

Her triumph was so prompt and so unqualified that she was genuinely overcome. "You—I—do I understand you to be asking me to marry you?"

"You needn't put such an offensive accent on the 'you.' I know I'm an ugly beast, and I'm not always easy to get on with. But you suit me, and I swear I'll be good to you—considerate—you shall have anything in reason that you want. Come! Put me out of my misery. Let me kiss you! I can assure you I've been wanting most desperately to do it."

He turned suddenly, drew her towards him and kissed her roughly, thirstily, on the cheeks and lips and throat. It was all that she could do to bear it without shrinking; and when it was over she read him a dainty homily upon how *not* to kiss a woman if you desire to retain her affection. Then he said his failure was due to lack of practice, and tried

various types until she could have screamed with repulsion. Ah, if the lips crushing her own had been Carfrae's lips! . . .

Poor wretch! She had sealed his doom, tied him to her incubus for life!

But she did not repent. He could have had her for the asking, and he had not willed it so; and for herself in future there would always be ladies' maids, boudoirs, fur coats, diamonds, Daimler cars, and all the other accessories without which she felt she could not exist.

CHAPTER X

ASTER'S VIEWS

SOME days later Caron faced his brother-in-law across the untidy writing-table in the chaotic smoking-room at Archwood, and saw the blank amazement spread over the candid countenance of Lyndsay, who had been away from home and had only just received the shattering news.

"But look here, Car, you can't do this, you know —you simply mustn't," he objected earnestly. "Bosh about dishonourable and so on. Write to the girl and tell her that, just as much for her sake as your own, this thing can't go on. You are no longer young—you have no longer the feelings of youth—any lie will do for a creature so inconceivably dense as she must be. She's a mere flapper. She may shed a few tears on the old governess's bosom, but she will have recovered before you get as far as the Red Sea on your way back. It's madness to break up your whole life by sticking to a silly mistake."

Caron cleared his throat. "It's gone too far. Her mother and she are up in town buying wedding clothes. Lance has been told, and is crazy with delight. The whole thing was formally announced before I could draw breath. Oh, she's got me fast

—I mean the mother, not the girl. By heaven, if the girl was the same sort as the mother I'd not hesitate—I'd turn tail! But as it is, I—well, somehow I can't. It would be like picking up "Trash"—he lifted the little dog as he spoke—"and drawing a knife across his throat as he was in the act of licking your hand. Of course I meant to wriggle out. I intended to leave her behind, go out without her, write from India to say I had changed my mind. But the mother was too sharp for that." . . .

"Only one thing to be done," said Lyn briskly. "Go to this girl and tell her the truth. If she's a good sort she'll take it standing up. I shall put it to her——"

"No, you can't. I won't have it. You couldn't wound a helpless thing like that so desperately. I had a letter from her this morning that made me want to cut my throat——"

"Amorous?"

"Worse than that. Just limpid—artless—showing the most utter confidence in me. I told her to go and buy herself a ring when she got to London. She tells me she has chosen chrysoprase, because my name begins with C. She had to have it specially made, and says her mother is vexed, but she hopes I will not be. Of course Rita wanted her to choose a costly gem, and the finest chrysoprase you can buy is comparatively inexpensive. I'm hanged if I know what I can do."

Lyn groaned. "Why did I go away? I've come into this affair too late."

Caron sprang from his chair and began to pace the room.

There was a sound of a passionate step outside, the door handle turned with violence, and Aster bounced in without knocking, wearing a dirty smock, bareheaded and barefooted.

"Well, Carfrael Caron," said she insolently, "I told you I would consider your news calmly and give you my decision. It is this. I do not remain under your roof when your new wife arrives."

Caron turned from the window and stood, considering his daughter. Usually she had upon him the effect of a gad-fly. Now, in the face of his dilemma, her tantrums seemed futile, and he remained calm.

"All right," he said absently, "go where you please, do as you like. I wash my hands of you."

This was so wholly unexpected that for quite a long time the child remained standing there, the wind taken out of her sails. "You mean that?" she asked at last.

"If *you* mean seriously to carry out your threat —then *I* mean that you may go and do so."

Some uncertainty lurked behind her laugh of triumph. "How much do you intend to allow me?" she asked.

"Allow you? Nothing. Why should I?"

She grew scarlet with passion. "I am your daughter."

"Then render me a daughter's obedience."

She laughed shrilly. "Obedience to parents!"

Why, all that was scrapped ages before I was born."

"So it was. I was forgetting. The decalogue has gone overboard, and with it, of course, all parental duty towards the young. You are capable of looking after yourself, you have often told me so. Very well—go and do it."

"Oh, you tyrant! you take a mean advantage!" cried the child hysterically. "Did I ask to be born? Did I wish to come into the world, handicapped by sex, at the mercy of a slave-driver like you?"

"No more than I asked of the gods to be disgraced by a child like you," replied this new, stony father. Caron's eyes were shining, hard and brilliant. He looked both handsome and dangerous. As always, Aster quailed before his personality, but she still fought.

"And you expect me to remain here, subject to these reactionaries—stupid old nurse, and a still more stupid old woman called Kirby, with ideas that came out of the Ark—you mean to marry a silly girl young enough to be my sister——"

"Young enough to be your grand-daughter, I should think," replied Caron; and suddenly he smiled. "Virgin Dawn," he muttered under his breath. Then more loudly, looking full at Aster: "Yes, you poor neglected little soul, I am doing my best to put you within reach of better things than you have known. Now just run along to Mrs. Jennings and tell her what you would like to wear at my wedding."

She screamed and stamped. "I am not coming to your wedding!"

"Good! I rather hoped so, but did not wish to hurt your feelings by asking you to stay away. I had told Mrs. Jennings to take you to town in the car this afternoon to choose your frock, and so on, but I am glad to be spared the expense. By the way—are you leaving the house at once, or will you wait to make your gesture until I bring home my wife? If you are leaving to-day I'll say good-bye, for I'm very busy at the moment——"

Somehow, she could not exactly tell how, Aster found herself outside the door.

Caron closed it quickly after her, and turned to Eldrid with a swift, odd look. "Lyn," said he, "I've got a plan—just thought of something."

CHAPTER XI

THE BRIDE

FOR Valery, the world as she knew it had wholly passed away, and all things, conspicuously her own underclothing, had become new.

When her bridegroom and Lyndsay Eldrid came to dine at their hotel the night before the wedding, she was attired in pearl-coloured chiffon with a silver girdle. Her head was filleted with a sparkling bandeau, and her shoes of silver tissue were trying to look as if they were not size seven.

Caron arrived alone, Lyndsay having gone to make certain arrangements for the morrow. He found Val beside a fire, which, though it was almost June, was very welcome. Poor Val! She did try hard to subdue emotion, but with all her efforts she sobbed audibly as she cast herself into the arms of her *fiancé*, who, with set jaw and braced muscles, endured the inevitable.

“Well, Val,” he said after several minutes, when he had succeeded in depositing her on a sofa, and releasing the hand to which she clung, “it seems ungracious to be talking business, but there are things I want to say, now that we are alone—getting married, you know, is not all roses and honey—there are other matters for consideration——”

"Oh, yes, of course!" Sitting up she dried her eyes in eager obedience. "I didn't mean to be so silly; but it was so wonderful . . . seeing you. Ever since you went away I've been wondering if it could really be true——"

"Nice of you! Well, what I want to say is rather unpleasant, and for your private ear alone——"

"Yes?"

"I must tell you that, before I came up north, to stay at Grendon, I had sent in my name to the W.O. about a job that was going. I—I didn't hear any more about it, and thought it was off; but from something that was said to me to-day I'm afraid I may have to take it. I mean, if it should be offered, I am not in a position to refuse it."

"Oh! Is it a good appointment? One that you will like?"

"I thought I should like it well enough, at the time I applied for it. But I must feel differently now, because it is impossible that my—er—wife should accompany me."

"Oh!" Her voice shook, but she made no outcry, as he had feared she might. "You mean—we might have to part—quite soon?"

"Yes, that's what I mean. There's another man they might get. I hope that can be arranged; but I thought I ought to warn you."

Valery stared at the fire through a mist of tears. "Happiness doesn't seem to last—very long—does it?"

He winced a little. "We must make the most of

it while we have it," he said politely, "but I haven't finished this business talk yet. You know, of course, that Mrs. Knight is contemplating a second marriage? Well, she may not have told you that, in the event of her doing this, Grendon Grange and the income that goes with it both revert to you. By your father's will it is so arranged."

"Why—she said she meant to sell the Grange——"

"She cannot sell it. It belongs to you. I point this out because, in the event of my having to go off and leave you, I want you to feel free to live either at Archwood or at the Grange, whichever you prefer."

She started. "How long—would you be away?" she panted.

"About two years is the idea, I believe."

Two years! To her it was a lifetime. He saw that she could not speak. "I ought to have dwelt more fully upon the disadvantages of marrying a soldier," he said with a sigh.

She twisted her hands together. "I hope I should be brave," she whispered. "I'll try—indeed, I will. It won't matter to me where I live, if you are not there. Oh, Carfrae! I pray they may not want you, and, yet, of course, everybody must want you." She contemplated him with adoring eyes. He almost groaned.

"I'm a dull bridegroom for you!"

"No wonder, with this hanging over you," she answered tenderly, instantly forgetting her own

feelings in sympathy with what she believed to be his.

"Here," he said, almost roughly, drawing a leather case from his pocket: "I brought you a wedding present. Lyn came and helped me to choose it, and he's artistic——"

She gave the cry of a happy child as she opened the case. "*Oh, Carfrae!*!" He reproached himself because it irritated him to be called by his name with this school-girl mixture of bashfulness and gloating.

The door was opened, and a servant ushered in Eldrid.

"Hallo! I interrupt a lovers' hour!" cried he.
"'Scuse me, I'm off!"

Caron recalled him peremptorily. "Come here, you ass, and be introduced. Val, this is Lyn, of whom you've often heard."

"I say!" cried Lyn, warmly shaking hands. "This tongue-tied old beggar hasn't given me the vaguest idea what you were like! Now I see for myself." His voice was an unspoken compliment, and it cheered her. "I do hope you and I will be friends," he went on; "marriage so often cuts off a friendship between men. Don't let yours——"

"Oh, is it *likely?*!" Her voice expressed the supreme improbability of her capacity to come between two such Olympians as these.

Caron drew some documents from his pocket and turned to his brother-in-law. "Make friends with Valery while I find Mrs. Knight. I have to get her signature to one or two papers."

Lyn sat down, preparing to study indulgently this formless creature, who, nevertheless, was a woman in the making.

Val found him easy to talk to. He began by asking if she liked the necklace, and by fastening it round her neck, and making her admire herself in the chimney mirror.

"It is lovely," she told him with delight. "I had no idea that things—and people—were so pretty. Of course, at the Grange I hardly ever saw anybody, and I thought mother was exceptional in bestowing so much thought upon appearance; but here, in London, everybody seems the same. The streets and shops are swarming with dainty, charming girls, and beautiful fabrics and colours . . . it makes me wonder more and more what Carfrae could possibly see in me."

"Perhaps it was just the difference that attracted him," hazarded Lyn, "though, if so, he must have had a bit of a shock this evening, for you are got up to the nines, are you not?"

Val laughed consciously. "I'm not accustomed to my fine feathers yet," said she, "but I hope I soon shall be. I dare say," she added shyly, "that you will be a great help to me. You know what Carfrae likes, and," she added with a shy laugh, "I think it's very nice and rather wonderful of you to want to be friends with me."

"I assure you I feel most strongly that my sister's children need womanly love and care."

"It's almost a pity that I am going to India so

soon—before I make real friends with them," said she regretfully. "But Kirdles will be very good to them, and by the time we come back they will have grown used to the idea of me, won't they?"

He flushed guiltily as he assented. As Car had said, there was something limpid about Val. She was so ingenuous that her simplicity had power in it. He hated the idea that he was conniving at the shock which awaited her upon the morrow. He felt that he could understand Carfrae's refusal to undeceive her. Her right feeling was so unconscious as to be rather awful, and though he talked and made friends, he was grateful when the entrance of Carfrae and Rita cut short a somewhat embarrassing interview.

CHAPTER XII

THE WEDDING

VALERY KNIGHT opened her heavy eyes upon her wedding morn with a sense of coming disaster, born of she knew not what.

She had lain awake until the small hours, fighting against a formidable depression, confessing to herself that she was terribly afraid of Caron, wondering what lay in store for her when she should have spoken the words that made her his.

She greatly longed for Kirdles, the only being on earth who really loved her. Her feeling towards her mother was of such a kind that she shut her eyes to it—would not face it—and Rita's refusal to allow Kirdles to bring Lance to London overnight had been the final step in the estrangement.

Miss Kirby and the boy were travelling by the night train—an arrangement not very good for Lance, but which saved Mrs. Knight the price of two rooms at the hotel. The other Caron children were coming to town in time for the ceremony, and after it Miss Kirby would shepherd them all back to Archwood.

Rita's own plans were made. She was starting for the Italian Lakes as soon as she had seen the married couple off. Jerrold would join her there.

In a couple of months they would be married quietly, without returning to England, and would pass the winter in Egypt, after visiting Athens and other places.

With a cruel triumph she had noticed Carfrae's glum misery, his terror of Val, his mute despair. She had conquered, and she gloated over the writhings of her victim. She did not reflect that a man, if pushed too far, may snatch at his revenge.

When he was taking his leave she held up to him her lovely mouth with a mischievous smile. "Good night, my son-in-law that is to be! Won't you give me a kiss? I'm told kissing of mothers-in-law is quite in fashion!" As Caron touched her cheek with rebellious lips she knew that he would have liked to bite her.

Jerrold had dined with them, and the contrast between the two men had never seemed to her so marked. She did not waver, however. Her ticket was taken, her luggage packed, a first-rate maid once more engaged. To-morrow would rid her of all encumbrance, and she would start forth to enjoy the world, undisturbed by a single duty.

The bride-to-be rose from her bed and dressed herself at a very early hour, and as soon as she was ready hurried down into the hotel lounge to await the arrival of Miss Kirby and Lance. Her heart was oppressed by that terrible possibility mentioned to her by her bridegroom overnight. Suppose it were really to happen? Suppose the Government should call upon him—in a week, perhaps, one short

little week? What would happen to his lonely, forsaken bride?

He had told her to say nothing of it, and she was loyal to her heart's core; but the dreadful possibility lay on her heart, and seemed to be turning all the warm love and faith and desire of service cold, as though a dreary wind blew chill upon it.

The hotel Boots, busy with a broom, looked discouragingly at the young woman who paced up and down the hall, her hands in the pockets of her sports coat. She was in his way. Valery never even knew the man was there.

A taxi stopped outside. She dashed forward. Lance, rosy and strong, leaped out laden with a mass of fishing tackle, golf clubs and tennis bats, and, clasping them all firmly, hurled himself through the swing doors. Then he saw Val, let fall the whole cargo, flew at her and hugged her. "Oh, Val, such a beastly shame! They wouldn't let me bring Josh, and the poor old thing's howling his heart out. I had such a lovely idea. I wanted him to have a white ribbon round his neck and hold your train in his teeth! But Kirdles wouldn't hear of it."

Only as she felt the boy cling did poor Val realise what had been the extent of her own famine for his company. Kirdles had by now paid off the driver and entered the hotel. Her face was a study as she saw the bride, in her tweed suit, standing there in the lounge "like anybody else."

"*Val!* My dear child, what *are* you doing here?"

How came your mother to allow you downstairs? Why, you might meet Colonel Caron!"

"Well, why not?" quavered poor Val, utterly unnerved by this reproof where she had looked only for tenderness. Miss Kirby, snatching her hand, urged her towards the staircase, babbling that for a bride to be running about in sight of everybody on her wedding morning was contrary to all tradition.

"Simply isn't done, old thing," laughed Lance, helping to push the rebellious Val upstairs. On the landing they met Mrs. Knight, her eyes full of cold anger.

"Really, Val, what you will do next I don't know! Kirby, you have brought her up to be a perfect idiot!"

"M-mother, I never knew!"

"Never knew! There are things no normal girl should need telling," snapped Rita, ushering her into her room as if it were a gaol. "Stay here for pity's sake, and your breakfast will be brought. Go and have your bath now, and try to remember you are going to be married."

Three hours later, in white and silver tissue, with a sheaf of flowers in her shaking hand, Valery took her seat in a smart car, let out expressly for weddings, side by side with an elderly Knight uncle, whom she had not seen for years. Her Aunt Esther, the Principal of St. Frideswide's, was not able to be present, as term had not long begun. Uncle Charles deemed it his duty to prattle facetiously as

they traversed the short distance to the church. She heard nothing, and when she alighted at the foot of the long flight of dirty steps that led to the door, she saw nothing clearly.

Slowly they proceeded up the nave, to the strains of Lohengrin's emotional love-music to where Car-frae Caron stood stiff as a ramrod, so pale that he looked yellow under his deep tan.

Lyndsay Eldrid was behind him, and on Val's left, at the end of the pew, close enough to touch her, was a tall, slim girl of eleven, with a face so keen, as well as beautiful, that even in her condition of a nervousness that bordered on idiocy, the bride noticed her. There was a menacing look in the blazing eyes, as though their owner were keyed up to some fell purpose, and when the priest read the solemn invitation to anyone who had objections to make to come forward and state them, there was a stir, a murmur, as Aster stepped out of her seat with the evident intention of going up to the speaker and making a communication. Before she could move a step, Miss Kirby, from the pew behind, grasped her by the shoulder. Swift and furious the would-be mischief-maker turned, and met the perfectly fearless and steady gaze of a pair of shrewd grey eyes in an elderly face. Something in their expression checked Aster long enough for Kirdles to bend forward and whisper very softly in her ear:

"Don't startle her. She's so frightened, and you might set her off crying."

Something subtle in the tone and manner suggested that Kirdles and Aster were forming themselves into a mature committee of two, in order to watch over and protect something helpless. The appeal touched the vain child in a tender spot. She liked to be thus treated. Half unconsciously her lips parted in a smile, and nodding silently, she went back to her place. Thereafter the ceremony passed off without hitch.

Hardly had the two chief actors disappeared into the vestry before Lance leaned across from his place on the other side of Miss Kirby and whispered tauntingly to his sister: "First round to Kirdles, my lady."

Aster's splendid eyes flashed over Miss Kirby's wedding attire. "Mean to say you're Miss Kirby?"

"I am; and from your likeness to your father I guess that you are Aster."

"If I'd known I wouldn't have held my tongue for you!"

"Then it's fortunate you didn't know," was the good-tempered and quite tranquil reply. Aster glared at her.

"It'll never answer," she vouchsafed, after scrutiny. "I'm full of complexes, but the biggest of them all is an inherent horror of anything in the nature of a governess. That is because my mother had a governess who frightened her. It's an antenatal complex, you know."

"Very distressing. Where do you feel it most?" asked Miss Kirby, with so deep an appearance of

interest that the child, on the look-out for irony, could detect none.

"I don't expect you read Freud, do you?" she asked disdainfully.

Kirdles, having talked over her future pupil with the colonel, had been studying her own rôle with zeal during the past fortnight. She shrugged her shoulders slightly. "Bit out of date, isn't it?" she asked lightly. "Have you studied him much?"

"Oh, yes. I read anything I like."

"And do you understand it all?"

Lance uttered a smothered gurgle of delight. "Understand? Why, she's barmy on the crumpet! She hasn't the vaguest idea what she's talking about half her time."

Miss Kirby leaned forward confidentially. "I don't believe all Lance says. You look to me a very intelligent girl. We must have some good talks."

Aster was flattered, though she tried hard not to appear so. She would have liked to shine, and to continue the conversation; but at that moment the hesitating murmurs of the organist were exchanged for the trumpets of the "Wedding March," and her father, coming from the vestry with Valery on his arm, walked straight up to where his children were sitting.

"Aster—Humphrey—this is Valery," said he concisely.

Val's mouth was quivering, her eyes swam in tears, her nose, it must be confessed, was distinctly pink. There was something piteous about her, and

suddenly Aster knew, with the terrible acumen of childhood, that here was no rival to alienate her father's affections, but someone you could be sorry for, someone, whom, perhaps, you might even patronise. Impulsively she stepped forth from her pew, held up her arms and kissed her stepmother quite heartily. "Lance says you're a good pal. I hope you'll like me, too."

"Oh, Aster, you darling!" cried Val, struggling with a great sob and joyfully bestowing moist kisses. Caron looked curiously gratified. Laying his hand on his daughter's shoulder he smiled into her eyes. For the first time in months the child knew the sweetness of approval—the relief of being no longer in opposition to the Government. Grasping Lance's hand, she marched down the church behind the married pair, Miss Kirby following with little Humphrey.

"Oh, Carfrae, let them come in the carriage with us," pleaded Val, and he, jumping at this wonderful chance to escape from a *tête-à-tête*, raised no objection.

They all packed in together, little Humphrey, in his blue silk suit, seated upon his father's knee, and drove, in a state of high amity, back to the hotel.

"Are we to call you Valery?" asked Aster eagerly, and Val replied:

"Of course."

"I never meant to call you anything but Mrs. Caron. However, you don't look a bit like Mrs. Caron."

"I don't feel like it," laughed the bride tremulously. "Somehow I feel less like it than I expected."

"Well, I think you do look like it with all those brats clinging to you," said her husband, speaking more gaily than she had ever heard him speak.

"It really was rather clever of my father to find you," observed Aster.

"Bless you, it was I who found her," vaunted Lance, evoking thereby the first note of discord—a mutter from Aster of: "Oh, how you do swank!"

They reached the hotel door. Red carpet awaited them, and quite a little crowd in the street. A murmur of astonishment as the three children were handed out by their father before the bride could emerge, brought a flush to the colonel's face. He gave his arm rather hurriedly to his wife, and they disappeared within the hotel. The hall porter at once came forward bearing a telegram upon a salver.

"Congratulations, I suppose," said Val, whose spirits had risen.

"The message arrived ten minutes ago, sir, and the messenger says he was strictly ordered to wait for your reply," said the man as he presented it. "He says it's urgent."

CHAPTER XIII

DISILLUSIONED

CARON took the message from the salver with a swift, guilty glance at Valery. Her hand slipped from his arm and she stood gazing at him, very pale. Mrs. Knight had arrived back from the church immediately after them, and was furious at their having defied convention by bringing the children with them. She stood arrested, the words she had meant to speak dying on her lips, while her son-in-law tore open the envelope and glanced at the enclosure. He raised his eyes.

"Let the messenger wait," he said to the porter. "The answer will be ready in a few minutes. And now"—he glanced impatiently round—"where is our private room—the room in which we are to lunch?"

The head waiter sprang forward. "This way, sir."

Caron took Valery by the hand. "Come away from all these people." In his voice was a savage irritation, born partly of shame. "Fancy being married in a hotel—all this publicity—perfectly intolerable."

He drew her rapidly forward, along the dark corridor, while she strove and strove for control of her voice which might suffice to ask him whether he

had received the dreaded orders. She could not speak, desperately though she tried. It was needless, however. Deep in her heart she knew—she knew.

He was murmuring something under his breath—of his own regret—of its being rough on her—but Rita had followed them up so closely that as they entered the room where the bridal feast lay spread she was at their heels; and she proceeded to address Caron in a voice unlike anything that even her daughter had previously heard.

“Carfrae, what is the meaning of this? What was in that message?”

The tone of bullying, of insolent familiarity, which was so startling to the bride, gave Caron back all his composure. Glancing at Rita in a preoccupied way, he turned from her without a word and drew Valery with him to a side table near the window, which held writing materials. Hastily seating himself, he wrote a few words on a telegraph form and looked up, his gaze travelling round till it found Lyndsay, who, with the other guests, had entered the room. Lyndsay, answering the silent summons, came forward, took the paper and left the room.

Rita had pursued the pair to the window, but had failed to see what was written. She stood biting her lip, glaring upon her son-in-law in a fever of apprehension. He faced her imperturbably. “Valery is not unprepared for what has happened,” he said quietly. “I warned her that it might so fall out. I think I am right in saying that I warned you also.

Before my visit to Grendon I had, as you were aware, put in for command of the Chugga Expedition, and I have just been summoned to take up the post."

"Preposterous! Your marriage should, of course, have put such an idea out of the question, and I assumed that it had done so. Are you, then, not returning to India at all?"

"Naturally not. I have to report at the W.O. to-day."

"To-day!" She lost all caution. Though she knew the innocent bride was listening, she could not keep back the words that leapt to her lips:

"You brute! You arranged this on purpose!"

Valery heard them with an indescribable shock. She heard, too, her husband's instant and icy rejoinder. "Oh, pardon me, the arrangements for this precipitate marriage have been entirely yours, not mine."

None of the guests was near enough to overhear the low, rapid colloquy. Rita turned a sickly yellow colour, but she tried to twist her features into a smile.

"Don't forget that others besides yourself have urgent plans. I leave by to-night's boat for Calais. I cannot possibly take charge of your wife."

"Let me assure you that nothing is farther from my thoughts than such a suggestion. My wife has two houses, and can live in either. You will, perhaps, before we sit down to table, allow us a few moments' privacy in which to discuss her plans."

"Oh, you have those all cut and dried, I'll war-

rant," hissed Rita, tears of rage swimming in her beautiful eyes.

Intent only upon hurrying Valery out of reach of her further words, Caron seized the girl's arm almost roughly and literally propelled her out of the room, along a passage into a small empty lounge.

He little knew that the passive being whose elbow he was gripping so ungently was another and a wholly different woman from her with whom he had so lately stood before the altar.

Valery was emphatically no fool. She had heard quite enough.

She knew now.

Her mother, in order to be rid of her, had foisted her into the arms of an unwilling bridegroom; and the man, while yielding perforce to the scheming, had taken steps immediately to disembarass himself of the unwelcome burden of the bride thus flung at his head.

Unwanted, unloved, forsaken on her wedding day.

For a minute after she found herself alone with him it seemed to her that the accumulation of what she was feeling—the keying up of her emotions and the sharp reaction—must prove more than she could bear, and that her brain would burst.

Just as she was swooning off into merciful oblivion, pride, like the merciless smart of a wound, came to her aid and pricked her back to consciousness.

Her childish dream of love had snapped like a

withered daisy-chain, and she was left face to face with the agony of realisation.

"Valery," he began unsteadily, seating her upon a couch and taking his place beside her, "this is most unfortunate."

It was on her tongue to cry "Don't lie! Don't trouble to throw more dust into my newly-opened eyes!" But to what purpose? The man cared nothing for her. A wrangle or reproaches would accomplish nothing but to turn his present indifference into positive dislike. In a mirror which faced them she saw their two figures—his upright, graceful carriage, finely-cut head, hard, clear glance; her own mushy, formless shape, her pink nose, her crooked wreath. It was all she could do to refrain from tearing the bridal mockery from her head, stamping upon it, shrieking.

She did none of these things. In a voice which hardly shook she courteously said: "Don't think of me. You warned me. I was not unprepared. And I suppose you have not much time. We should be thinking of you."

He looked at his watch. "At least I have time to lunch with my wife and to drink her health," said he. She could hear the relief in his voice, and a new ring of kindness. He had dreaded tears and embraces. "I am sure you understand," he went on, "that a soldier under orders has no option. There is not time for sentiment. I have to be at the War Office at four o'clock, and the urgent thing which you and I must settle is what you had better do."

Valery stared down upon her red hand and its

wedding ring as she replied: "Have you not made arrangements?"

He glanced sharply at her. Did the words hold an accusation? Had she grasped the meaning of Rita's burst of venom? Looking at her expressionless face, he could not believe it. "There are two courses open to you—to go to Archwood or to Grendon," he began stammeringly.

She replied: "I will go to Archwood. Your children are now part of my duty, and Miss Kirby will be there——"

He broke in: "Miss Kirby and the children can be where you choose. Don't let that weigh with you. If you prefer the Grange——"

She strung up herself to utter difficult words.

"I do not wish to go back to the Grange—yet. It would be painful to me to return there. I left it with such different hopes." . . .

Her pluck touched him as he had not looked to be touched. With more feeling than he had yet shown he replied quickly, "I see. I see."

"Later, perhaps," she continued, "we might all go there . . . for the summer holidays. But for the present I will go to—your house."

He answered gratefully. "It is what I should myself prefer. The children are there, and it is Lyndsay's home. By the way, shall you have any objection to his being there? He is away a good deal; comes and goes. But if you would rather he cleared out altogether, I will give him the tip."

"Oh, certainly not. I know Miss Kirby will make him comfortable."

"I don't doubt it. My main anxiety is that *you* should be comfortable. Miss Kirby has expressed herself as certain that she can run the house on the sum I am prepared to allow; but if you are of the party, I must increase it. You will want a maid, won't you?"

Val opened her mouth to say "No," but her new and amazing personality coming into play, thought better of it. She considered that in all probability it would be better for her to have a maid, and she replied tranquilly: "Just as you think."

"As I have already explained, on your mother's remarriage you will become possessed of the Grange in your own right, and an income of between three and four hundred a year, out of which I think you should pay the upkeep of the place, unless you prefer to let it. As for me, in the African desert I shall have no chance to spend anything, so you can have all you want in reason." He proceeded to show her, upon a bit of paper, a memorandum of his means and of what she might draw upon. She listened and acquiesced or seemed to do so in a passive silence.

"Well," he said at last, having made her take the piece of paper and put it away, "I want you to promise to write regularly. I shall get your letters very irregularly, I fear, but I should like to be able to look forward to a budget of news whenever communications get through. I have as great faith in Miss Kirby's good sense as in her integrity, and I feel that I can trust both her and you. I——"

He broke off suddenly, leaning forward and staring at the ground in obvious embarrassment.

"I ought to ask you to forgive me, Val," he went on at last. "I did not put things fairly to you when we—er—settled to get married in such a hurry. Perhaps it was that I thought of you as very young and inexperienced; but I am now feeling that I have made a pretty holy mess of things generally. It's—well, it's quite on the cards, that I never get back from this little show. Uncharted country, you know; poisonous climate, equally poisonous natives. If—if we don't see each other again, I hope you won't be—er—very much cut up. Lyndsay has my will, and I must go and sign it." He took her hand.

Until that hour it had ever been ready to cling to his, tremulous with the timid joy of his caresses. Now he felt that it was unresponsive, dead, that, had she dared, it would have been withdrawn. "Val, you don't bear malice?" he asked anxiously.

She answered surprisingly: "No. For the sake of that morning when we knew that Lance would live, I do not bear malice."

"Val," he cried, almost pleadingly, "the boy loves you. Even that little demon Aster has taken to you. Be as good to them as you can, won't you? I can't express to you how gratified I was when Aster kissed you of her own accord."

"Yes, that was lucky, wasn't it?" said Valery gravely. "I mean it made things easier for you." Once again he vaguely sensed irony, but her stolid

demeanour seemed to make the idea preposterous. "I shall try to do my duty," added his wife simply.

"I am no end grateful to you, Val. You are a plucky child. And now I must get busy, signing my will. I'll find Lyndsay." He rose to his feet. "We may not have another quiet minute, so let me kiss my wife."

She had risen when he did, but as he extended his arm to put it round her, somehow she eluded him and was not there. She had turned aside to lift from the sofa her sheaf of fading lilies. When she looked back at him she was so white that he thought her about to faint.

"I will ask you to spare me," said she, a dignity in her voice and manner which amazed him. "I have had much to bear—I have been through a great deal. If you wish me to sit down to table and—and—not break down—please let us bid each other good-bye quietly."

For a moment he hung on the brink of words. Something in the dumbness of her agony affected him horribly. He sought wildly for some consoling lie which might tend to soothe the torture which he divined, though dimly. But what could he say? There was nothing to be said. She offered him her nerveless hand. He stooped and kissed her brow, keenly conscious that she made no response, that she merely suffered his touch, and that unwillingly and in order to avoid argument. As he followed her back into the luncheon room the haughty colonel had an annoying suspicion of having been snubbed.

CHAPTER XIV

MISS KIRBY IN CHARGE

IT was the middle of October before Lyndsay Eldrid returned to Archwood from a sketching tour which he had prolonged from week to week out of sheer dread of coming home and facing things.

It is fair to him to say that he was anything but proud of the part which he had played in helping Carfrae to plan out his scheme of release.

While they were arranging it both men had felt themselves to be pitting their wits against those of Rita Knight, now Lady Jerrold. The bride had been viewed by each of them as a mere pawn, a child whose wishes hardly counted.

Upon his first introduction to Valery, Lyndsay had been uncomfortably aware that he was not "playing the game." Her wonderful innocence, her boundless trust in her bridegroom, had caused him twinges of discomfort; and later the way in which she had stood up to the blow, her reticence, her dignity, had forced upon him the conviction that she had been cruelly let down. He had felt it impossible to face this poor blundering idiot of a girl whom he had helped to befool.

He lingered abroad, accordingly, moving all the summer from valley to valley in the Pyrenees. Only once had he heard from the strange new family now living at Archwood. It was Miss Kirby who then wrote, in reply to a request from him, that certain things he needed might be sent out to him, which was promptly done. The letter which accompanied the parcel was friendly, but brief and business-like. Beyond saying that all at Archwood were well, it told him nothing. He sent postcards from time to time bearing his change of address; and all his correspondence had been punctually forwarded. After three months his curiosity got the better of his scruples. He balanced long between dislike of facing Valery and keen desire to know what Miss Kirby was making of her job.

As he entered the drive gates he wondered whether Lance and Aster pursued their former unruly courses—ranging over the countryside, leaving gates open, treading down hay and crops and otherwise studying their duty to their neighbour; or playing a game which seemed never to lose its charm to them—that of lurking in an angle of the old boundary wall and slowly emerging to cross the high road just as a car was coming past, so that the driver had to clap on brakes with tyre-destroying force to avoid running over them.

What means, if any, had the elderly Miss Kirby found for restraining them? And Aster's pursuits had sometimes been of a still more objectionable kind. He remembered a gardener's boy called

Marsh. Ought he to have given the simple old governess a hint?

The front garden seemed to him, as he entered, to be in apple-pie order. He had never seen the autumn flowers so gay. The whole house, too, had the appearance of being polished till it shone—windows, curtains, knocker and so on, neat as a new pin.

He had written to announce his return, but without naming a train, so he had not been met. He entered a hall—the same, yet not the same. There was something about it which was cosy and comforting. It was sweet-scented, flower-filled.

Nobody was about, and after wandering into the drawing-room, where there was a good fire, he passed through the open window into the garden.

Willis, the head gardener, was pruning roses not far off, and greeted him with a smile. "Well, Willis, so the new management hasn't fired you?"

Willis's intelligent face relaxed. "No, sir. Miss Kirby and I work very well together. Glad to see you back."

"And how," pursued Lyn, unable to restrain his curiosity, "do things go indoors? Been a revolution, eh?"

"Well," replied the man, his eyes twinkling, "if there has, it's been what the Socialist papers call a bloodless one. Miss Kirby, she changed all the staff indoors, and a good thing, too. They were a poor lot. She has two maids less than there used to be, yet I'm told everything is better done. I hear the

head housemaid is to valet you, and I'll be bound you'll be better served than you were with that lazy beggar Alfred."

"And Mrs. Caron?"

"She was well when she left home, sir."

"Left home? I didn't know she was away."

"Gone to Oxford to read for her degree," replied Willis. "Seems to me a mighty sensible thing to do. She fretted here, as was but natural, but it was pitiful to see how she fell away. So she went off last week to St. Frideswide's. I understand that one of her aunts, a Miss Knight, is the Lady Principal of the College."

Lyndsay contrived to dissemble most of his surprise, which was enormous. His conscience gave him a vicious tweak, and after a slight hesitation he changed the subject. "And Miss Aster?"

Willis gave him an odd look. "I think you'll find Miss Aster gardening, the other side of the golden privet hedge," he replied, collecting his tools and preparing to move off. "You'll excuse me, sir. At the moment I'm without a garden boy, and it makes me somewhat busy."

"Oho! Marsh turn out badly, eh?"

"Well, not altogether; but it was time he went," replied Willis tranquilly as he took his departure.

Lyndsay was sensible of curiously mixed feelings —relief that he need not face Valery, and a queer regret that she should be absent. He had wanted to feel sure that her immature heart was intact, and that she had not suffered as a result of her

desertion; but what Willis had said sounded rather pitiful.

Slowly he descended the steps which led to the lower terrace, rounded the golden privet hedge, and discovered his niece in a gardening overall, busily engaged in raking together the weeds just extracted from one of the beds of the rose garden, a pursuit so unlike all that he remembered of the young lady that he remained where he was, staring in amaze.

"Hallo! Here's industry!" he remarked at last. Aster stared, looked round, turned fiery red and laughed awkwardly.

"Hallo, Lyn! You home! Glad to see you," she vouchsafed; but she did not cease from her employment.

Lyn felt puzzled. "What's up, old lady?" he asked in a different tone. "Anything wrong?"

Aster rose from her knees, caught her pile of weeds between two boards, and flung them into the barrow standing near. "I've got some weeding to do," said she shortly.

"You mean that you've been set to do it?"

"You don't suppose that I'm doing it for my own enjoyment, do you?"

"Why are you doing it, then?" he asked sharply.

"Miss Kirby's orders."

Lyndsay felt angry. Surely this was coming it a bit strong. It could not be part of Aster's education to do the weeding. He speculated wildly upon the system of intimidation which it must have required to induce her to accept such a position.

"You're kidding me, aren't you?" he finally inquired.

"You'd better go and ask Kirdles."

"Surely you've done enough now. This bed looks topping."

"I've got to do the next one before tea," she replied, turning back to her work with a dogged expression.

Lyn, mystified and displeased, made his way back to the drawing-room, which Miss Kirby entered from the hall at the same moment. She had just returned from a motor drive, accompanied by nurse and Humphrey. The little boy, catching sight of his uncle, ran with joy to greet him. He looked splendidly well and healthy. Nurse also was beaming.

"Where's Lance?" asked Eldrid.

"Oh, he's been at Laytondene a month now," replied Miss Kirby, naming one of the leading preparatory schools, "and he is getting on famously; writes in the best of spirits. Do sit down and be comfortable. I hope you haven't waited for your tea. I sent the car to meet two trains, and after all I fear you had to walk."

Her manner was frank and cordial. He felt himself welcomed.

"Yes," she went on, as she poured out tea and supplied him with delicious scones, "we were so afraid he might not be happy at school, having been brought up so differently from the usual boy. However, I sent him to our curate, who is very good with boys, for two hours' coaching each day,

and also for cricket practice. He picked up the game wonderfully quickly; in fact, he one day remarked that it was what he had always wanted, without knowing what he wanted; and this morning he writes that he has been put into the second eleven! Great glory!"

Lyndsay was really pleased at this news, and soon found himself talking to Kirdles like an old friend. He was still conscious of the sense of well-being which had extended itself to him at the very gates. The drawing-room looked fresh and yet it was manifestly in constant use. Order evidently reigned, both indoors and out.

"I've been hearing what rather astonished me," said he presently: "that Valery has gone to Oxford. Not at all a bad idea. How is she? Well, I hope?"

There was a slight hesitation before the quiet answer came. "Thanks. I am somewhat less anxious about her than I was."

"Has she been ill, then?"

"About the middle of July I did not think she would live."

He cried out in horror. "Heavens! What was the matter?"

Miss Kirby raised her eyes and looked at him steadily. "Do you really need to ask?"

"You mean," he stammered, "I understand you to mean that she felt the parting from her husband so deeply?"

Miss Kirby hesitated again. There was a set of her lips which made Lyndsay feel small. "She is

young," said she then, "and exceptionally inexperienced. She had successively three terrible blows, one after the other, within three months. Her previous quiet, sheltered life had not prepared her for such things."

Lyndsay somewhat incoherently expressed sympathy and distress. He wished to know what form the malady had taken.

"About six weeks after her wedding day I went up to her sitting-room one afternoon to ask her a question, and found her lying unconscious upon the floor. She was most unwilling that I should send for a doctor, but I dared not let her have her way in that. He told me afterwards that he was only just in time."

"Just in time! But what was wrong?"

"Her heart was broken," said Kirdles quietly, "and she was just lying down under it."

Lyndsay found himself staring into the fire through a mist.

"I found out then that she had hardly ever had an hour's sleep since her wedding day. Of course, I blame myself for not having sooner discovered this; but I had some excuse, for I was so busy the first month of our time here, getting things into some kind of order that I had no leisure to think of her, and she was so quiet. She never uttered a complaint nor said she was ill. She took a fancy to occupy the old nurseries on the top floor. She turned one into her sitting-room—you know your sister never used them, she had two first-floor rooms

for nurseries—and Val used to be up there, and I thought she was busy about her own little arrangements of furniture and so on. But she was just like a flower taken out of water and left to die upon the floor!"

"Horrible!" muttered Lyndsay, twisting his hands as he stared at the leaping flame.

"I was in despair until I bethought me of this Oxford idea. She has quite good abilities, you know, though her personal tastes are more for an active and outdoor life than for study. But she has had a sound education, though I say it, and caught at the idea of fitting herself for earning money. She only needed a few weeks' coaching, her aunt recommended a good tutor; and the stimulus gave her an objective; so, I am glad to say she has taken hold on life again. But so altered! I don't think you would know her if you met her in the street!"

"How do you mean, altered?"

"Well, you know she was stout, as some young girls are in their teens. It usually takes a couple of years to fine them down; but she fell to mere skin and bone in six weeks."

"Good Lord!"

Miss Kirby turned to a small drawer in the work-table at her side, extracted an unmounted photo and passed it to him. The girl there represented seemed all eyes. She was seated in a garden chair, her pose listless, her thin, wistful face expressing hopelessness. Lyndsay could not believe that it was

the stout, beaming young woman whom he remembered.

After a prolonged scrutiny he flashed up a furtive glance. "This really *is* Valery? You are not pulling my leg?"

She shook her head.

"Has—has the colonel seen this photo?"

Kirdles took it from him quite abruptly. "Certainly not," she replied, as she replaced it in the drawer; and her tone seemed to forbid any kind of rejoinder.

Lyndsay knew that he crimsoned guiltily. The unspoken condemnation is always hard to support; but *qui s'excuse, s'accuse*, and he could not speak. To carry off his confusion he began to talk at random.

"I hear that the Chugga Expedition is actually in motion at last. How thankful Carfrae must be!"

"Thankful? Why?"

"Oh, the delay must have been most irritating. All this time kicking his heels in the hinterland."

He did not at all like Miss Kirby's smile. "Really you need not trouble to keep up that deception, Mr. Eldrid. Is it possible you did not know that the papers stated fully, about the middle of July, that it was never the intention of the Government that the Expedition should start before October, and that although Colonel Caron had been in Africa since June he was there on leave, to shoot big game?"

Lyndsay bit his lip. He moved uneasily in his chair.

"I really—— Is that so?" he began, and then the insincerity of it stuck in his throat. "Does Valery know this?" he asked after a wretched pause.

"When I found her unconscious upon the floor of her room she had *The Times*, which contained the information, clutched in her hand," was the grave reply. "The knowledge doubtless came as the final shock."

Lyndsay was conscious of colouring guiltily. He had seldom felt more completely unhappy. He dared not look up, but perused the pattern of the hearthrug carefully.

"You mean," he said at last, "that Valery thinks—that she supposes——"

"I mean that she *knows* her husband deceived her concerning the necessity for his instant departure. I will leave you to imagine for yourself what the effect upon a nature as upright and as simple as hers was likely to be."

The pause which ensued was dreadful to the young man. Miss Kirby presently broke it with a quiet and natural-sounding question concerning his time in the Pyrenees. "I was there many years ago, when Valery's grandparents, the Knights, wintered in Pau," said she, "but I never went beyond Cauterets. I would have loved to see Gavarnie and the Cirque, but that was before the days of char-à-bancs!"

Lyndsay, only just fresh from that marvellous spot, could not resist the temptation to talk about it, and she listened as though genuinely interested. Presently he found himself thanking her quite humbly for her welcome. "I don't expect I ought to go on living here—it only adds to your cares. I settled here because it was company for my sister, and also because my contribution helped her to make ends meet——"

"Had she, then, a difficulty in making ends meet?"

He laughed. "Most housekeepers have; don't you think so?"

"I can't say I find any, with the more than adequate allowance the colonel makes me."

Lyndsay shrugged his shoulders. "Blanche was not much of a manager. You seem to be AI in that line."

"Wait till you have been here a week," she retorted good-humouredly. "Then, if you still say you would like to go, I shall know what to think."

She was so natural and so unaffectedly cordial that he presently determined to bring out the question which had been craving utterance ever since he came in. "What's this latest stunt of Aster's—weeding the flower-beds?" he asked, as carelessly as he could.

Miss Kirby gave him a shrewd, humorous glance. "You have seen her, then? Did she not tell you?"

"She was very reticent. I could not make it out."

"Perhaps I had better follow her example."

His colour rose. "I have no wish," he said, rather haughtily, "to be either impertinent or intrusive, and I realise that the kids are in your charge; but, after all, they are my sister's children, and I'm fond of 'em."

Miss Kirby looked at him with benevolence. "I should like very much to tell you what I think so greatly to Aster's credit. If I do not, it is because it is her affair, and I have no right to break her confidence. She is beginning to trust me, and I want to keep that trust. She may tell you anything she pleases, or, if she prefers, I will tell you myself. But I hope you sympathise with me when I say that it must be left for her to decide."

Lyndsay's eyes kindled. "You are a good sort! Will you explain it all, if she says you may?"

"Willingly."

He was off, running like a schoolboy, and soon returned, having met his niece on her way indoors to schoolroom tea.

"She says you are to tell me anything you think fit; and she was tremendously bucked at your leaving it to her."

Kirdles smiled at him across the tea-table.

"Aster is working out a punishment which I have given. I had some moments of horrible anxiety a fortnight ago, when I discovered—how I need not tell you—that she was on most unsuitable terms with our gardener's boy, a young fellow called Marsh. I am afraid it was more her fault than his. He was in a state of daze, half hypnotised, it

seemed . . . altogether dazzled. I came upon them one day, was shocked, but did not then speak, thinking it might have been a chance meeting. However, I watched, and found that they met every day. There were hidden notes; and there were kisses——”

“The young hound! I’ll give him the biggest thrashing of his life——”

“He has gone,” she answered quietly. “There was nothing for it but to dismiss him forthwith, though he was far less to blame than she, because she was quite cool, deliberately experimenting in sentiment, while he was in the state I have tried to describe. I have sentenced her to do Marsh’s work in the garden until Willis has replaced him; and she is wonderful; sees the justice of it and is taking it finely. I saw Willis privately, instructing him to set her a job each day. It is, of course, far less than the boy did, but she does not know that. So far she has performed it with scrupulous exactitude. There’s something fine in her, isn’t there?”

“But are you sure—sure,” he stammered chokingly, “that that little beast of a boy didn’t——”

“I am perfectly sure.”

“Aster can lie like a company promoter——”

“Agreed. But she does not lie from cowardice, only from vanity. She is carried away by the desire to pose and be interesting. It was that same craving which led her to start an affair with the only available boy. Now she is beginning to prefer to pose upon a pedestal of honour and justice.”

He rose, holding out his hand.

"You are a trump. You will be the saving of that girl."

"She's not easy to handle," replied Miss Kirby with a sigh, "and yet, do you know, I sometimes fancy it is easier to bring up naughty children than good children? My Valery never did anything that made punishment necessary. Her instinctive feeling was always right; and for that reason I don't think I ever really got to understand her. She is much deeper and more complicated than I ever supposed. Now Aster is so alarmingly variable, she shows herself to me each day from so many different angles that I am becoming amazingly intimate with her. It is a great thing for her to feel that she can trust me; and a great thing," she added, with a relieved little sigh, "for me to find that you approve."

CHAPTER XV

TWO YEARS LATER

IT was two years and a half from the date of this conversation, and late in March, when one mild morning the Marterstead Hunt met on No Man's Land.

It was one of those exciting, delusive days when the English winter whispers in your ear that this is positively his last appearance—that spring is coming, with warmth and sunshine and bursting buds. The sun shone through a sky of misty blue, faintly dappled with white cloud, upon the usual delightful medley of vehicles, from touring-cars to side-cars, from motor-lorries to butchers' carts, assembled to see the show.

There was a brave display of pink, and some fine horses. Hugh Hatherleigh, of Lannerswyck, walking his hunter over to where his mother sat in her limousine, was glad that fate had called him home from the Colonies to dwell in his native shire, even at the cost of being chronically "hard up."

Beside Mrs. Hatherleigh in the car sat Albinia Feranti, looking, as Lady Bowyer, who had a tongue of her own, once said, "a creature of mist and mystery." Another critic had likened her to a moth, for she affected that faint shade of fawn-colour which resembles a moth's plumage. To-day her

head was artistically swathed in chiffon of this tint, matching her hair and lightly marked brows, and leaving her large eyes to form the only bit of positive colour—surprising you by their sudden emergence when she looked up—like one star in a night-blue sky glimmering from grey cloud.

She was a distant cousin of the Hatherleghs, and her mother had married an Italian. Both were now dead, and Albinia lived a life of luxury on very small means, by help of her psychic endowments. She was a medium, or as she preferred to call herself, a super-sensitive, and had been a devoted friend of the late Mrs. Caron.

A couple appeared upon the road from Marterstead, riding side by side, deep in talk and well mounted.

"Hallo!" said Hugh Hatherleigh sharply, "there's a fine girl! Sit her horse, can't she, though? Albinia, who are those two just riding in? Man with canary-coloured hair——"

"Those? Oh"—with sudden interest—"the man is Lyndsay Eldrid, the artist—you know—he is much admired——"

"Help! Admired for that hair?"

"Oh no; but he paints wonderfully. Had a one-man show last year, Pyrenean pictures. That must be his sister-in-law, the new Mrs. Caron."

"That girl? Rot, Albie! She can't be more than eighteen."

"Well, I think it must be, but I never saw her. Her husband's the man who was in command of

the Chugga Expedition. They went to find some buried city or other, and fell foul of the Huns, didn't they?"

"What, *the Caron*—the man who has discovered Hal-i-Mor?"

"Yes, that's the man."

"You must be barking up the wrong tree. That Caron has been away more than two years, and was not heard of at all for more than nine months, don't you remember? Because the Huns raised up the Hali tribe of Arabs against them, and the whole expedition was corralled."

"And the colonel extricated them by means of a stratagem, didn't he? Well, that's the man I mean. His first wife, Blanche, was my devoted friend, so I ought to know."

"You tell me he left that girl behind, and went off to almost certain death——"

"So I understand. Lyndsay Eldrid is brother to the first wife."

"That so? He seems to be on excellent terms with the second."

"Evidently. He was not in sympathy with his sister. She was a rare soul, with unusual psychic endowments. Poor Lyndsay! I remember he arrived home unexpectedly once; he lived at Archwood with his sister, but was often away. She was having a wonderful *séance* cycle, and he found the house full of psychic experts. As she was not expecting him home, she had put me into his room. Poor little me! He *was* so peeved! Odd *ménage*, isn't it?"

"Do you mean that he still lives in the house, and that the husband is in Darkest Africa?"

"So I understand."

"Why, I should have thought, even in these lax days, that it wasn't done."

"Oh, there's a duenna, a dear old thing, who brought up this girl, and now looks after the entire menagerie. Shall I attract Lyndsay Eldrid's attention?"

"Yes, do. I want to talk to Mrs. Caron."

"Oh, bother," muttered Lyndsay to Valery, "there's the psychic expert making signs to me. Last time we met, I dashed into my bedroom and found her brushing her hair there! My word, the fur flew! I suppose we must ride over and shake hands."

"Of course. How interesting. I've been hoping to meet her," said Val, "but she has been away whenever I have been at Archwood."

They walked the horses over to where the Lannerswyck party awaited them. In appearance and manner Valery Caron was now the product of perfect training, physical and mental. She had the air of self-possession, of poise, which had been so lamentably lacking in Valery Knight. Her manner, nevertheless, was frank and simple, quite free from the least touch of priggishness.

"It seems odd," she said presently, when they were all introduced and talking to each other, "that we should not have met before; but Miss Kirby has had to do most of my visiting for me, as I have been at Oxford."

"Oxford!" echoed Hugh.

"Yes. I got married before my education was complete, and when they sent off my husband upon that terrible Expedition, I thought I might as well go up to the 'Varsity to fill in the time."

"Have you completed your course?" he wished to know.

"Not until next term; but I feel my terrors are looming very near now, and my tutor packed me off home for a week-end, as she thought I was getting stale."

"I blessed that tutor, I can tell you," said Lyndsay. "She has been slaving and slaving, term and vacation alike—no end good for her to get a day off."

"And isn't the weather being kind to us?" laughed Valery. "I'm enjoying every minute of it!"

"And when do you expect Colonel Caron back?" asked Albinia softly. The question seemed to chill the manner of both Lyndsay and Valery; ever so slightly, but perceptibly to a super-sensitive.

Lyndsay answered. "I expect you have learned from the papers that Caron has been fearfully ill. He was in an unget-at-able spot called Tahoura, where he could not be reached. There was a French hospital there, however, and we hope to hear that he is in Europe quite soon."

"Is it true," asked Hatherleigh, "that there is grave suspicion of Hun complicity in the circumstances of the capture and imprisonment of the Expedition?"

"Seems more than probable," replied Lyndsay at once. "We think that is why we are receiving so comparatively meagre an amount of news. A great deal took place, no doubt, on that Expedition which will never appear in the Press. I have heard it suggested that my brother-in-law will have to be careful of himself—that he goes in fear of assassination; but we hope that is exaggeration."

"Do come and have tea to-morrow afternoon, Miss Feranti, and bring Mr. Hatherleigh," said Valery, who had been talking to the old lady. "Mrs. Hatherleigh says she does not go out to tea, but we should be delighted to see you."

"Dare I," asked Hugh, "have tea with a lady who is reading Greats? I know not a word of the doctrine of the enclitic D or any other congenial topic."

"I'm only reading for an English literature degree, and I don't think we talk shop any more than the men do," said Val with her fine smile. "I would like you to meet Miss Kirby; she is one of the very best."

"The most wonderful woman in England, bar none," declared Lyndsay solemnly. "I am seriously thinking of asking her to marry me. I don't suppose there's more than a quarter of a century between us—just the fashionable disparity."

"Is she what my old nurse used to speak of as a 'bar bloo'?" asked Hugh.

"Not a bit of it. A chimney-corner Victorian, who always has the linen aired, the dinner hot, the

maids contented, the house clean, and the fire going. I've never been so happy in my life."

"Then go home and propose without an instant's delay," advised Hugh solemnly, "or you will find you have at least one rival. Such beings are all too rare in a post-war world."

"She's more than rare, she's unique," replied Lyndsay, "and Mrs. Caron here is the result of her training."

"Look here, you know, your swank's a bit intolerable," complained Hatherleigh, but had no time for more, as the hounds had by this time arrived, and in a very few moments the hunt moved off, tailing away gently towards the first covert, to be drawn and followed by a determined crowd of cyclists and foot passengers.

It was a record day. They found almost at once; and their fox, after giving them a splendid run was killed in the open up on Winstable Downs.

The following afternoon Hugh drove Miss Feranti over to tea at Archwood, as invited. The fine weather held, and the old place was seen to great advantage, rows of brilliant crocus aflame in the borders, blue scillas and snowdrops spangling the grass.

Miss Kirby found Hugh Hatherleigh charming. He did not seem to think it a bother to talk to an elderly woman. He was evidently deeply interested in Valery, and it was not difficult to induce Kirdles to talk of her.

"Yes," said the good woman, "she is to me just like my own; and to my love for her has been added a great compassion, because all her life she has had to suffer from what I hold a great evil—separation from her nearest and dearest. Her parents were in India—her father died there. When her mother at last came home, she was a stranger to her own child, and they did not understand one another. Valery married at once; poor girl, I really think she did it to escape the bitterness of her disappointment, for she had idolised the idea of her mother, and the reality proved so different. And then, hardly was she married, than she found herself completely separated from her husband; and such a state of things is dangerous, because it is unnatural."

"Let me see—her mother is Lady Jerrold, is she not? I think Albinia said she had met her in Egypt, the winter before last."

"Yes. They are abroad a great deal. We have spent the last two summers in Valery's own house, which came to her from her father—Grendon Grange, in Westmorland; and Sir Otho Jerrold's place is not far off, so she and her mother have seen a little of each other, but not much. My poor child has been terribly alone but for me."

"I suppose Colonel Caron is on his way home now?"

"We hope so, but communication has been very difficult. While he was so ill the Government was very good in giving us news of him; and the French Government, too, for he was ill in Algeria, and they

sent bulletins most carefully. It was ever so far inland, and a place where they said no white woman could go; and, moreover, he was so desperately ill that the end would have come long before Valery could have reached him, even if she could have got there, which seemed more than doubtful. He dictated a letter when he was convalescent, saying he should start for Europe the moment the doctors gave leave; and we are expecting letters or a cable any day."

"Bilson and Cartwright, his two subalterns, are both home."

"Yes. But they have no recent news of him, because they did not go to Tahoura at all, but came home by some other route which was shorter. They sent the colonel to Tahoura on account of the hospital there."

"Well, he'll be much feted when he does get back. How long had they been married when he went away?"

Kirdles hesitated, but decided that concealment was useless, since the circumstances of the Caron marriage were pretty widely known. "Did you not know? They were parted on their wedding-day. He found the Government summons when they got back from church."

"Hard luck, indeed! And they have never met since?"

"Never."

"Jove!"—with deep interest—"I wonder what will happen when they do!"

CHAPTER XVI

ALBINIA TAKES A HAND

YOUR dear and lovely old-world garden!" sighed Albinia, who always contrived to say the obvious thing elaborately. "Do let us go and walk in it. To me it is filled with memories . . . yes, and more than memories," she murmured, lifting her big eyes to Lyndsay. "To me it is a haunted garden . . . and to-day I have brought my camera. Do you think Mrs. Caron will resent it if I experiment? Sometimes I obtain wonderful results."

"I'm sure Val will have no objection to your taking snapshots, but I advise you not to suggest to her that you hope to capture the shade of her predecessor," returned Lyndsay dryly, as he pushed the french window wider and they stepped out upon the gravel.

They were followed, after a while, by Valery and Hatherlegh; and the sun was so warm that for a time they stood and sat about quite contentedly while Miss Feranti took photos of them, in various spots which had been, as Lyn remembered, most frequented by his sister in her lifetime.

Before long, however, Val and Hugh forsook the garden for the stable-yard. The boys had started

breeding Sealyhams; and Hatherleigh, it appeared, was something of an authority. The vociferous infants were housed in wonderful modern sanitary cages, and the inspection was quite a lengthy matter.

Albinia, left to poor Lyndsay, who was always hopelessly bored by her intensity, moved sighingly along the walk, yew-bordered and terminating in a sundial, set in a circular yew enclosure, which was the show-bit of the Archwood garden. In summer it was filled with lilies and delphiniums and orange alstrœmerias, but now the borders were purple and gold with crocus, and the hyacinths were just thrusting stubby green noses from the teeming earth. The psychic lady drew in deep breaths.

"All this garden is fragrant to me of your exquisite sister. Was she not a rare soul? I have had so much talk with her since she passed over. It was a wonder and a shock to her pure faith, that her handsome husband consoled himself so quickly."

"Indeed? If so, she must have become much less intelligent than she was upon the earth plane. She had, by her own wish, lived apart from Carfrae for so many years that they were quite estranged; and she must have known that a young widower can't look after a houseful of children without help."

"Oh," said Albinia softly, "she knew, of course, that on this plane she had never reached her husband's soul; but she always told me that she fully expected, when she passed on, to double her influence over him."

"I don't think she has succeeded," returned Lyndsay bluntly.

"Ah, I ought to remember that, according to your pose, you are quite earth-bound," rejoined the lady tenderly. "But with me you need not pretend. Whence comes the soul in those wonderful pictures of yours, if you are really no more than you feign to be? You only mock at psychic things because you dare not face their implications."

"Please allow me to say that I don't mock at psychic things at all. But I knew my sister—I venture to suppose that I knew her better than you did. She had good points, but her failing was her egotism. She was too self-centred to influence Carfrae, alive or dead."

"Colonel Caron is very hard," murmured Albinia. "Forgive my saying so. He is so marvellously handsome, he would have conquered any girl he choose to woo; but he never gave himself—his inmost being—to darling Blanche."

"I am sure Blanche never wanted it."

"Oh, Mr. Eldrid! It was the tragedy of her life to be misunderstood."

"The tragedy of her life was to think herself so. Miss Feranti—you are making me say unpardonable things about my sister; but there is such a thing as justice. I was always very sorry for Carfrae."

"If he could have but divined the truth! I am full of sympathy for them both. How blind we poor mortals are! Let us hope his second marriage will help him to cultivate his soul."

"It ought to; Mrs. Caron is a most exceptional girl. It doesn't take a psychic expert to see that."

"I am so interested to have met her. What a fortunate chance she was home for just this particular day! I am off to Rome to-morrow."

"Indeed! I didn't know."

"Yes, I am going to my great friend Madame Bellarno, a wonderful mystic who lives in the Via Gregoriana. I am thirsting for her and for Italy. I always winter in my native land, you know, but this year I had to stay with my aunt after uncle's death, until Hugh could get home, across the world."

She rambled on, about Blanche and her psychic powers, until Miss Kirby called them in to tea to the immense relief of her listener.

When their visitors had gone, he sank into a deep chair, and wiped his brow.

"Val, you are a wretch to leave me with that creepy-crawly creature all the afternoon!"

"Oh, sorry, poor old boy. I was liking Mr. Hatherleigh very much."

"Yes, I'm glad he's come home, he'll be a nice neighbour—won't he?—next summer, when your troubles are over, and you have not your nose everlastinglly in an Anglo-Saxon grammar."

Val, as Lyn expressed it, "shut up like a clam." She never made any reply to allusions to the future, as he knew well. He longed to ask her what her intentions were, how she felt about her husband's

return, which must now be imminent. She never gave him a chance.

Only the previous week, Lyndsay had encountered, in town, young Bilson, one of the men who had been with Caron, and had heard from him a great deal which was perfectly new to him respecting their doings and their hardships. He said nothing to Val of this meeting, because it was humiliating for her that her husband should so delay his return; but it could not be put off for ever. Quite shortly, husband and wife must meet; and then, what?

A fortnight later, in the warm sunshine of the Roman spring, Miss Feranti was gracefully descending the steps from the Trinità dei Monti to the Piazza di Spagna. Her soulful eyes were shaded by a wide hat-brim and a sunshade, and she was murmuring to the Italian professor who escorted her something of her feelings when she beheld the masses of flowers, narcissus, anemone, mimosa, which were piled upon the stalls at the foot of the steps, when her eyes fell upon the figure of a tall Englishman, slowly ascending, in company with the French Ambassador, and followed by a couple of attachés.

She uttered an excited cry of recognition. "Colonel Caron! Oh, I can't be mistaken! I did not know that you were back in Europe!"

Caron stopped short, dark colour invading his face, which would have been very pale but for its tan. He had altered and aged. The desert had

left upon him its ravaging mark. For a moment he looked like a boy caught robbing an orchard. The next, he was greeting her with cordiality. "Miss Feranti! I might have guessed that you would be here. Are you with Madame Bellarno, as usual?"

"Yes, I am. How full Rome is, is it not? and more delightful than ever! I suppose you are passing through? I was at Archwood, having tea, only a fortnight ago, and saw your beautiful young wife. They told me you have been ill, and you still look far from strong——"

"Archwood? Indeed! You can give me the latest news, then," he took her up quickly. "May I call upon you and hear more? I am pressed for time for the moment—or, rather, my companion is. Are you in the Via Gregoriana?"

She said that she was, and at once fixed a day for him to call upon her, and Caron, who had only made the appointment that he might now at once get rid of her, pursued his way with the Ambassador to the Villa Medici, there to discourse of Hal-i-Mor with the men who had unearthed Timgâd.

The sight of Albinia gave a jolt to his conscience. He felt distinctly uncomfortable. He wished that she had not fixed a date four days ahead, for he wanted to give her some excuse that might sound not too inadequate for his leisurely return.

He was restless and on tenter-hooks until the date appointed, and felt relieved when he went to the Via Gregoriana to find that Madame Bellarno was

out, though she hoped to get back in time to see him; and that Albinia received him alone.

He had his tale ready.

"I've been ill," he said, "in fact, I suppose I've had as near a squeak for it as ever man had; and when I landed in Europe I looked like nothing on earth, and I couldn't go home like that, not only because my wife is young, and we have been parted much too long, but also because I find I am to be lionised, and one must pick up one's strength, in order to go through that kind of thing."

"Oh, indeed, I see your point of view, and I sympathise . . . I ought to congratulate the hero of the hour——"

He gave a deprecating shrug. "Well," he said, "I sneaked off to Rapallo, where I thought I could lie doggo for a while; but I was only there ten days. The Government dug me out, and I have talked African politics with them, and Roman civilisation with the British and the French Schools, until I wish that Hal-i-Mor had resisted all our efforts to uncover it, and remained under the sand until the crack of doom."

"Poor fellow! Indeed I sympathise! But if I venture to say so, I hope you will go home as soon as they allow you to do so."

Something in her tone made him ask quickly, "Why? Is anything wrong?"

"Wrong? What an idea! No, because everything is so superlatively right! In your own super-comfortable home, with the marvellous Miss Kirby

in charge, and your beautiful and accomplished wife to nurse you back to health, you would make far quicker progress. Look at Lyndsay! Since he came back from the Pyrenees, he has never left home once, except to go to the Lakes with the family in the summer! And, oh! Talking of Lyndsay, is not that a marvellous portrait he has painted of your wife? Without doubt his *chef-d'œuvre*; and so remarkable because portraits are not his line. A veritable inspiration! But, of course, you have heard all about it. It was one of the successes of last summer's Academy."

It is difficult to express how much this information surprised Caron. What he expected his wife and family to do with themselves during his prolonged absence is not easy to say; but this news of their activities was wholly unexpected. He contrived to convey the impression that he, of course, knew about the portrait, and was wondering how to question the lady further without revealing his own shameful ignorance, when she went to a side-table and took up some loose photos.

"Look!" said she, "I put these out, thinking they may be more recent than anything you have seen. I did them the other day at Archwood, in the garden. When this one was done," she explained, laughing softly, "I need hardly say that they did not know I was shooting!"

The print showed a young maid and a man standing facing each other; Lyndsay in the act of removing a fly from Valery's eye. The girl stood on

tiptoe, hands plunged into the pockets of her long coat which, hanging open, showed the graceful outline of her in a pale-hued frock. Her chin was tilted, she was smiling mischievously.

"Rather felicitous, don't you think?" said Albinia, laughing softly; "but this one perhaps gives you a better idea of her."

She showed a group in which Val had her lap full of Sealyham pups, and was flanked on either side by Lyndsay and Hatherlegh. There were two or three others, each with the backgrounds he knew so well—the yew-walk, the gravel terrace—his own domain; his own wife; but surely, these must be absurdly flattered.

"They seemed to think, when we were talking, that you had not received by any means all their letters," went on this lady, "so possibly you have not seen this?" She displayed a really exquisite photograph in sepia carbon, evidently taken from an oil-painting. "I admired this so, I bullied poor Mr. Eldrid into giving me one. Is it not like looking at her? They had it reproduced for her to give her fellow undergrads when she leaves Oxford this summer."

Carfrae Caron took the photo from her in a sort of stupefaction. This girl was not only beautiful, but unusual. Her face expressed so much—was moulded upon such fine lines—that its effect was wonderful.

The dress—it looked white—was hung from the shoulders in Greek fashion, and was unrelieved by

any ornament. The hair was arranged in exact sympathy with the shape and the type of the face. Anything less like his own memories of his bride could hardly be imagined.

"You are right," he murmured. "I see this for the first time. Many of my things must have gone astray."

"Quite wonderful, isn't it?" she cooed. "But, of course, one must remember that the painter had every advantage. Living in the same house, studying her daily, knowing her in each varying mood, he could choose exactly what suited her best."

"Her term must be over by now," she went on, as still the man's eyes were glued to the portrait. "How delighted Lyndsay will be to have her back! It was pretty to see how pleased he was when he brought her to the Meet. She had a week-end given her, because they thought she was overworking. A brisk gallop did her all the good in the world—what a horsewoman she is! . . . Well, I suppose Lyndsay's innings is almost over now, for you must be returning to England fairly soon."

"Yes," replied Caron, to his own unutterable surprise. "I am off to-morrow."

"*To-morrow?*" She could not altogether conceal her astonishment. "Isn't that rather sudden?" she ventured, holding out her hand for the photo he held.

"I'm going to make a very bold request. Will you give me this photo? When I return home I will

post you another copy, but for the present I should much like to keep this."

"Delighted," she murmured, "and do accept a copy of each of these snaps also. You will feel more up-to-date in the family news."

"Thank you. My mails have evidently missed me, and that makes me uneasy, because it may mean that those at home have not received by any means all the news I sent them. I must get back as soon as possible; and meanwhile all my gratitude for your news and your charming gift."

Caron hardly knew how he got away at the end of his visit. Somehow he found himself out in the street, and making for his hotel in the Via Sistina, to dress for a dinner which was being given in his honour by the members of the British School.

It was late enough in the afternoon for the tall houses to throw broad shadow over one side of the road; and as he crossed into it he was aware of a youngish man, lounging against the wall, who stood unostentatiously upright, and then began to walk in the direction he was taking.

For a moment he remembered the warnings he had received respecting the determination of the Hali tribe to assassinate him; and wondered whether the Italian Government were setting a guard upon him. He decided, however, that this was too ridiculous, and walked calmly on. Nevertheless, he did not go straight into his hotel as he had intended, for his mind was in a ferment; but

strolled on towards the Pincian, pausing opposite the Villa Medici, where the road widens and one has a glorious view, over the parapet, of Rome lying at one's feet.

As usual, there were plenty of people about, and he took his seat upon the bench against the wall, leaning over and meditating. He was facing an entirely new, disturbing, exciting future.

He began to think back. During most of his long absence, until the capture of the Expedition had interrupted all communication, he had heard with regularity from Valery. That her letters should be dull and stereotyped, containing no news of interest, had not surprised him at all. Her matter-of-fact news concerning the children, their aches and pains, their pleasures, their progress at school, their growth, and so on, had been just what he had expected. They fitted in with his own idea of what Valery was; but they fitted in so little with what Valery had apparently become, that he began to consider them with more attention; and he remembered that he had missed something in all of them. Something which he had expected inevitably to find, was not there; was never there; the inference being that it was omitted intentionally and deliberately. He recalled distinctly that particularly in the first letters he received, he had looked for some kind of outpouring of feeling over their separation, of longing for his return. Had there been much of it, he would certainly have skipped it; but he now realised that there had never been one word of the kind. Valery had told him nothing of herself, beyond the

bare fact that she was at Oxford, or that she was at home. She had never touched upon her feelings, and never penned any kind of appeal. The invariable "Dear Carfrae" was as unimpassioned as the concluding "Yours, Valery."

This was curious, and it piqued him. He drew out the little bundle of snapshots and studied them carefully. How came it that he had never noticed before that, although a good many snapshots of children, dogs, Lyndsay and even Miss Kirby had reached him, he had never received one with a portrait of Val?

In the light of what Albinia had told him, he conceived of a reason for these omissions: a reason which was by no means Val's stupidity.

When he and she parted, he had thought his chance of return hardly worth considering. He had not dwelt upon the development of the situation when he should meet his wife again, because it seemed so unlikely a contingency. Now suddenly, like an unexpected light in a dark place, there gleamed upon him a wonderful prospect.

Albinia's innuendoes notwithstanding, he had no fears with regard to Val's allegiance. She had been besottedly in love with him. She was also exceedingly dutiful and almost sickeningly moral. He was her husband, and so that was that. Studying the interesting face, feature by feature, he felt thankful indeed that she was so eminently presentable, since she would have to make some very public appearances. He would stop in Paris on his way back to buy her some pretty things. He had just received

his passbook from his English bank, and the balance in his favour was as pleasant as it was surprising. Miss Kirby had proved not merely a faithful but a most able steward.

In his letters to Val he had been careful to maintain the fiction of his having been torn from her by inexorable duty. So assiduously had he held this idea before him, that he had begun to believe in it himself. He saw that it would be very awkward for him if she should learn, as she easily might, by way of the Feranti woman and the Hatherleghs, that he was now lingering abroad instead of hastening home to her. The only thing to do was so to expedite his own departure that he should be with her before such tittle-tattle could find its way.

He drew out his watch; and as he did so, the clock of the Trinità, softly striking, told him that he had plenty of time before he need dress. He rose and descended the steps to the Piazza, noting as he passed that the dark young man with the curved nose who had been standing in the shade in the Via Gregoriana also rose, and moved slowly after him. As he crossed the Piazza and went a little way along the Via Babuino, he wondered whether there was anything in it.

Pausing at one of those delightful shops where they sell wares in tooled leather, he purchased a frame to contain the photo just given him by Miss Feranti. Then he went back to Cook's office and bought his tickets for the morrow.

CHAPTER XVII

HOMEWARD BOUND

WHEN Caron, after that night's banquet, announced his immediate departure, and his cordial host and hostess cried out upon him, urging him to stay longer in order to meet all kinds of great ones, shortly expected in Rome, he drew out his lately acquired photo and displayed it with a smile.

"That's my wife, and she's waiting for me." He triumphed when he found that Valery was universally admitted to be good and sufficient reason for haste.

As he was driven back to his hotel, through the gardens of the Pincian, under the night skies of Italy, he felt more excited than he had done for years.

For very long he had been as it were dead to the calls of sex. His personal disappointment, his calamitous first marriage, his loneliness and his pride had built up barriers round his heart. In this warm spring night he knew that he was young and a man; and for the first time in many years the future looked alluring.

Upon reaching his room in the hotel, he went straight to the mirror and stared fixedly at his own

image. While Valery had been blossoming, he had been withering. The tiny crisped curls on his handsome temples were touched with silver; and he grimly compared his complexion to the leather of his suit-case.

Adney, his devoted batman, was in the room, busily packing clothes. This man had braved the Chugga desert with him, and was invaluable. He was never ill, never out of temper, never surprised. Caron was not sure that he did not prefer Adney to any other living creature. He felt an uncomfortable suspicion that he would feel his loss more than that of one of his own children.

"Adney," he said, "I've a kind of notion that there's a chap following me about."

The man paused, raising his eyes from the collars he was counting. "Indeed, sir? Well, I wouldn't be over and above surprised."

"Chap that looks like a Turk but might be an Arab of sorts. Curly nose, heavy-lidded black eyes——"

"Come to think of it, believe I've seen him," replied Adney with interest. "Loafing outside this hotel."

"Well, we shall soon know. He was following me, or so I thought, this afternoon, and must have seen me go into Cook's office in the Piazza. If we see him on the boat, or in England, we'll just give the tip to Scotland Yard, I think."

"And we'll keep our eyes skinned on the journey,"

replied Adney. "Lord, I've learnt to be quick with my shooting since the year before last!"

"He's probably not an assassin, but merely a spy, employed to track me down, learn my habits, and so on; but we'll take no chances, Adney." Slowly he drew forth his picture and set it down upon the table. "I met a friend of Mrs. Caron's to-day, and she gave me this. I don't want to be picked off when I've got that to go home to."

Adney sat back on his heels, contemplating the portrait, and nodded several times with conviction. "That's the stuff to give 'em, sir," said he; "no wonder you're off. If I might make so bold, I think you want the English air too—and English food—and so on——"

"Yes, I'm a bit of a caricature," replied his master, in sudden dejection. "Perhaps it's a good thing for me that she's already married me—eh? I look twenty years older than I did when she saw me last."

"That'll all come right, sir. A summer at home and you'll not know yourself."

"*A summer at home,*" repeated Caron softly; and his usually hard eyes were clouded and misty with dreams.

Easter fell early that year, and the trains were packed with the yearly exodus of the British from the Eternal City. Adney came to his master shortly after leaving Genoa, and said:

"That Chugga lad is in this train, sir. Thought I'd let you know. I've given a hint to the con-

ductor feller—he's French, and a good sort. We're all right in the wagon-lit."

"That seems to make it pretty clear, doesn't it?" said Caron thoughtfully. "Wonder what he's after."

When they had crossed the frontier and Modane was left behind, Adney came with more news. "He's not come through to France, sir. Seems he didn't know he had to get another passport. They turned him back. I heard it. He spoke very poor Eye-talian, and they was all storming at him something awful. Guard found him copying the address on your baggage and they took him for a train thief. I think he's off his job for the present."

"Good!" said Caron, and was himself surprised at the relief the news gave him. Now he could rest —now he could indulge in castles in the air, such as he had not built since he was a boy.

The journey, however, tried him more than he had foreseen, and he found himself obliged to rest a couple of nights in Paris. This delay made him later than he had intended, and it was Easter Day when they arrived in London.

The climate had a sobering effect. He came out of his rosy dreams into a world swept by a black east wind. Adney fussed over him, and urged him to abandon his design of arriving home quite unannounced, to the extent of telegraphing to be met at the station. "You go and catch a really bad cold, and you'll be put back weeks and weeks," he said hectoringly, to the vast annoyance of the man

who, for the first time in fifteen years, felt inclined to play the lover.

However, he did yield the point, to the extent of permitting the dispatch of the telegram. It would have been wiser to telephone; for, owing to the Bank Holiday, and the local dislocation of the postal service, the message did not come to hand until about eleven o'clock on Monday morning.

Miss Kirby was pottering round her conservatory—the one which opened from the dining-room—when the unexpected yellow envelope arrived. She was feeling thankful that Val and Lyn had gone off with a party for the day, and she had the house to herself.

The news took her completely aback. Knowing what she knew, her first impulse was to warn Valery, and that was impossible. They had gone to the Point-to-Point races, right over at London Colney, the other side of Marterstead.

They had expected some warning of this long overdue arrival; but as far as preparations for the reception of the traveller went, they needed but the finishing touches. Kirdles hurried off to summon her staff, but her heart was crying out: "What will happen? What on earth will happen now?"

When Caron stepped out of the annoyingly slow train in which, owing to the Bank Holiday, he had been forced to make the short journey from town, he hardly knew whether it was relief or disappoint-

ment which he experienced in seeing the platform vacant.

A chauffeur with a pleasant face approached and touched his cap. "Colonel Caron?" he said interrogatively; and as Caron surrendered his attaché case, he added, "The car's just outside, and Miss Kirby's sending a cart for the luggage, but she had a trouble to find a man who would go, owing to the Bank Holiday, sir."

A limousine was in waiting. "Miss Kirby thought you'd prefer the closed car—the wind's bitter this afternoon." As he carefully adjusted a fur-lined rug, the chauffeur added that he hoped the colonel would not mind being driven round through the paddock as the drive was just being new-gravelled.

Caron hardly heard what he said. "All well at Archwood?" he demanded, almost fiercely.

"Yes, sir, all well. Hope you're quite recovered, sir, if I may make so free? My name's Baker."

The man's eyes were eagerly admiring—the eyes of an ex-soldier, who can appreciate a hero. Caron noted that he spoke of Miss Kirby, not Mrs. Caron, as having given the orders. He wondered on what basis the household was run. He had never stated in plain terms who was to be mistress in his absence.

Could Valery be upset—bowled over by the shock of his unexpected arrival? He told himself that he had been inconsiderate to the last; ought to have given her more notice, poor little soul! . . . However, she'd soon get over that. It wouldn't

take her long to discover that this was not merely her husband who had come back to her, but her eager lover . . . and then . . .

His eyes softened and glowed at the thought of her waiting here for him, safe under the wing of the motherly old Kirby; doing her duty; hoping, praying for his safety.

He was struck, as they entered his property, by its general air of prosperity and well-being. "Hallo!" he thought, as they passed an old half-timbered cottage near the gate, "they've actually succeeded in letting the Dairy Lodge! Had it restored and let it well, apparently! How pretty it looks!"

The house in question, being too large for the cottage folk and in too bad a state of repair for gentry, had always been an eyesore and an anxiety. He recalled things which Lyn had said in his letters of Miss Kirby's administrative ability, and it cheered him; but his mind could not dwell upon it. As the car slid up to the door he leaned forward with a heart beating violently. It was wiser of Val not to risk a meeting before strangers—on the wind-swept railway platform. Here in their home on their own threshold she would meet him, and—

The door opened immediately, and the substantial form of Miss Kirby appeared, suitably clad in dark-blue silk. He noted that her hair had turned quite silver-white, which gave her a look of distinction. Her demeanour, however, was so unsmiling that, in spite of Baker's assurance of a clean bill of health, he felt convinced that Valery must be ill.

He was out and up the steps before Adney could open the door. "How de do? How de do? Where's my wife?"

"I am sorry to have to tell you that both she and Mr. Eldrid are out." The tone was polite but seemed to him conspicuously lacking in warmth. "I must explain that your wire was not delivered here from Marterstead until eleven o'clock this morning, and they had already gone off to the Point-to-Point races. I could not send word to them, for I had given Baker the day off, and had to fetch him back in order to have you met."

He stood arrested. "The Point-to-Point races! Why, of course! It's Easter Monday. Fancy my forgetting. Is it London Colney?"

"Yes, that is where they have gone."

"Too late for me to go there," he glanced at his watch regretfully, but glad to have his wife's absence thus satisfactorily explained. He entered the hall. "Well, well, how goes it? I think my first words should be an expression of gratitude to you, Miss Kirby."

"I hardly see where gratitude comes in," was her sober reply. "At least wait until you receive the account of my stewardship."

She opened the door of his own haunt—the formerly chaotic smoking-room. It looked most inviting, with a gay fire, the tea-things ready, and a fascinating arm-chair waiting to receive him. "I thought," she went on with some hesitation in her manner, "that you would prefer to be here, because

the young people are bringing back several friends to tea, and I am not sure how far your convalescence is advanced. We hear that you have been very ill."

The final sentence, quietly and coldly spoken, brought home to Caron for positively the first time, the picture of his own conduct from the point of view of his family.

Since leaving Africa he had not sent home one word. He had been so uncertain of himself, so much at a loss as to what line to take with regard to his wife, that he had put the whole idea of his home-coming away from him. Knowing it to be inevitable, he had yet sheltered himself behind his weak health and doctor's orders, with a vague underlying idea that he might get some specialist to forbid him to go to England at all.

He had not realised that the fierce light which beats, from the Press, upon the man of the moment, made his doings public property. As long as he was abroad, he had not paused to consider how his conduct would appear to those at home. He had six months' leave: the papers proclaimed it joyously. He had a Treasury grant: the papers asserted it to be well-deserved. He had the offer of a title: the papers wished all titles were as fairly earned. Yet he had supposed that like the ostrich he could hide his head in the sand and nobody would know where he was or what he was doing. Now, listening to the chilly courtesy of Miss Kirby, he saw not merely the courtesy but the utter folly of the course he had followed.

CHAPTER XVIII

A CONJUGAL GREETING

ADNEY relieved his master of the heavy top-coat he had worn in deference to the arctic blasts of the English spring, and he sank down rather limply into the arm-chair by the fire.

He politely hoped that Miss Kirby would not be inconvenienced by his having brought Adney. "He's got long leave, and he'll be off home in a few days' time," he explained, "but he thought he would see me settled in first."

Adney stood gazing at Miss Kirby with eyes full of smouldering resentment. He thought his hero was receiving a most inadequate welcome, to say the least of it.

"I shan't go, sir, till I've found out who's going to wait on you, and shown him what you require," said he stiffly.

"You'll do just as you're told, Adney," replied the colonel irritably. "Off with you, now, and see if the luggage has come."

"We have kept no man-servant indoors since you have been abroad," said Miss Kirby in apology. "The head housemaid waits upon Mr. Eldrid, and I understand he is well satisfied; but if you instruct me to do so, I will at once engage someone to wait

on you. Do you still require nursing? I naturally do not know."

"Nursing? Nonsense! I'm perfectly well," cried Caron in vexation; and then reflected that the admission was hardly politic. As soon as Adney had left the room he made a gesture for Miss Kirby to sit down. "Unless you are very busy, please give me a few minutes," he begged. "I am, as you see, well enough now, but I have been ill—very ill indeed. When first they let me loose out of hospital I looked like nothing on earth. I'm not much to boast of now, but I didn't want to come home such a scarecrow that my own family didn't know me. So I crept off to the Italian Riviera to convalesce; and then the Government got wind of me and they dug me out and brought me to Rome, and so on. . . . Quite suddenly I got a chance to leave, and I took it. I know I have been inconsiderate, but please make allowances for me. I've had an awful time, one way and another."

"We have gathered from the newspapers that you went through a great deal," replied the lady dryly. "Will you, on your side, please make allowances for anything which is not quite as you wish it, on the ground that we had no idea when we might expect to see you."

"Quite so, of course, of course. Don't take any notice of Adney, he's a fool about me; and since I had such a near squeak for it, he will hardly bear me out of his sight. I know I ought to have written, but my being able to start for England was so

sudden that I thought I should be here as soon as a letter. Then I found myself obliged to rest when I got to Paris, instead of coming straight through, so after all it would have been worth while if I had sent word from Rome. But now tell me the news. Valery first, of course. Is she well?"

"Ye-es. I think I may say she is fairly well now. She was rather worn out by the end of term, but soon picked up. However, I shall be thankful when it is over."

"Over? She will have finished this summer? Think of that! I have been away almost three years . . . so long that my wife has grown into a woman." He glanced up, a spark of mischief in his blue eyes. "You reproach me for negligence, because you have heard of my doings only indirectly; but may I not lay something of the same kind to your charge? I have lately been shown a reproduction of Lyn's fine portrait of Valery. But it was not sent me from this house."

"I hardly understand what you mean by saying that I reproach you, Colonel Caron; is it likely that I should so presume? But as regards the portrait —why should we think it would be likely to interest you?"

He was keenly annoyed, both by words and tone. "Come, that's nonsense. You must have known that it would be more interesting to me than anything else. But never mind that—the portrait itself—I want to see it. Where is it hung?"

"The painting? Oh, it is not here. It is at the Grange."

Her undeviating frigidity and unspoken censure maddened him. "The Grange? Grendon Grange? Why is it there?" he asked, with a curious feeling of inner disturbance.

"Why not?" retorted Miss Kirby, unmoved.

"Surely this is the place for it?"

"Mr. Eldrid gave it to Mrs. Caron. He brought it up north when the exhibition closed last autumn, and it is hung in her dining-room."

He tried to disguise his mortification. "Well, I'm disappointed, but I hope to see the original shortly. And now, what of the children?"

"The news is, I think, satisfactory of all three. Lance is not high up in his form, but he is so good at games that his reports are always lenient—too much so, I sometimes fancy. Aster likes Roedean, though I am not very sure of its being the best atmosphere for her. Humphrey only went to Laytondere last autumn, and seems quite happy there. His being brother to the captain of the eleven ensured his welcome."

"They are all away at the moment?"

"Yes. Easter falls awkwardly this year. They are all due home towards the end of the week."

"Perhaps that's a good thing. I shall have a few days in which to make friends with my wife."

His cheery words fell into a depth of totally unresponsive silence. Miss Kirby made no attempt to reply.

A slightly uncomfortable pause was broken by the sound of voices and of horses' feet. Round the bend of the drive appeared a party of half a dozen riders, in front of whom rode Valery, Hugh Hatherleigh on her right, Lyndsay on her left. The day's ride had brought the clear flush of exercise to the cheeks which had been too pale when she came down from Oxford, and she was talking with animation.

Caron sprang to his feet, and went to the window, standing behind the curtain, where he was not visible to the arriving party. He felt positively sick with excitement as he saw the beauty, the ease, the dignity of the girl on the chestnut filly. He made an imperative gesture to Miss Kirby, who was trying to escape, not to leave the room. When the gay and vociferous group had dismounted, had entered the house, and their voices and laughter were muted by the closing upon them of the drawing-room door, he turned a face of extraordinary pallor to the lady, and said hurriedly:

"Don't let her know—don't say anything of me until they have gone. I must see her alone first."

"Yes," replied Miss Kirby, with an air of infinite relief. "I am glad you see it. I know she will insist upon that."

His heart sank horribly. Without a word Kirdles had conveyed to him most definitely the fact that he must not look to be received with open arms. What a cad he had been! How unutterably foolish into the bargain! How could such a girl as this fail to resent such usage as had been hers at the

hands of the man who should show her most consideration?

Well—he was quite prepared for abasement. She should have as many and as fervent apologies as she demanded. They should be punctuated with kisses, sealed with the contents of some velvet-lined cases from the Rue de Rivoli. He held all the cards. He was her husband. He could afford to laugh at old Kirby's stiffness.

"If you would excuse me now, I ought to go and pour out tea for them," she was saying. "If I delay longer, she will be asking where I am——"

"Oh, go—go by all means! I'll get upstairs without being seen, and make myself presentable."

A couple of hours later, impetuous feet hurried along the corridor, the door of his bedroom was flung open, and Lyndsay rushed in, bidding him welcome.

"Sorry I was out, and so on, but you gave us no chance, did you? Come, you look better than I feared. We were prepared to see you brought back on a shutter, as it seemed you were still too ill to write. However, you got away with it out there, didn't you, all right! Hearty congrats., old chap. I hear it's to be a Baronetcy!"

"I told 'em I wouldn't take a Knighthood," said Caron with a grave smile. "Lance to think of, you know."

"Oh, then, you did think of us, on and off? We were inclined to suppose that you must be suffering

from loss of memory, as we heard nothing," chaffed Lyn.

Caron, who had been gazing into the fire, turned round abruptly. "Lyn, don't rub it in! Old Kirby has been making me feel like a kicked hound; but you know the worst of me, and you can perhaps make a guess at what my state of mind has been. . . . As you know, I never expected to come back at all; and when I found myself still alive, it took a long time to string myself up to face the music. Then, in Rome, I met Albinia Feranti. She gave me—that!" He waved his hand to where the framed photo of Val stood on the table by his bed. "Judging by what I hear, Valery seems to have become all that I supposed she never could be."

Lyndsay started visibly. He flashed a quick glance from his brother-in-law to the portrait and back. There was pity in his eyes.

"Oh, but that's no go, Car," he said with concern. "You don't surely expect to be able to patch things up, do you?"

"Patch things up? What do you mean?"

"Between you and Val. Take my word for it—nothing doing."

Carfrae's whole attitude stiffened into that of the British husband. "Valery is my wife," he said.

Lyndsay slowly shook his head. "Oh, no, she's not. She promised to be, but she isn't, you know . . . however, she is quite competent to speak for herself. She is waiting for you now, down in the smoking-room. Go and see her face to face—hear

what she has to say. Only let me give you one hint. You left England because you didn't want to have anything to do with her. You'd have given your back teeth to be free. Well—don't be pig-headed now, and quarrel with your freedom just because it's flung in your face."

Caron looked furious. "I don't take such words, even from you. I have certain views, certain standards, as regards marriage——" he broke off in confusion, checked by the ironic gleam in Lyn's eye. He was on the point of some unpardonable sneer, but he choked it back. Lyn's air of honest sympathy restrained him. Without another word he walked to the door, opened it, and strode along the corridor and downstairs.

The hero of *Hal-i-Mor*, the man of the moment, felt absurdly abject as he opened the door of the smoking-room and found himself in the presence of his wife.

He was in his dinner-jacket. She also had changed, but not into evening-dress. She wore a knitted suit, powder-blue in colour, with a white silk jumper under the coat.

His first thought was that she was more beautiful than the portrait. Certainly it had not flattered her. Her carriage was dignified, her air so composed that it might almost have been called majestic. There was something arresting in her stillness, and he felt that all the disadvantage was on his side as he came forward after carefully closing the door behind him.

When he was near her he paused. He could not have told why, except that her eyes forbade closer approach. He held out both hands.

"Well, Valery,"—his voice shook—"have you no welcome for me?"

Still meeting his look steadily Valery lifted her right hand and touched his, as one does to an acquaintance with whom one has no wish to be on better terms.

"How do you do?" she said.

"I am pretty well, thanks, and hope soon to be as fit as ever I was," he replied, held upon the spot where he stood as though she had fenced him off with barbed wire. "Valery—after all this time—are you not going to say you are glad to see me?"

"No; for I am not glad to see you," was her astounding reply, "except for the reason that your return puts an end to a period of waiting which has not been easy to bear."

He passed over the shock of her first words to seize upon what followed.

"I know that—I know it cannot have been easy," he caught her up quickly, "but it is over at last! I am here—I am at your feet. I want to tell you—to explain——"

"I will ask you, if you will be so kind, to let me speak first," said Valery, still with the same air of settled purpose and complete certainty. "You will perhaps allow that, after the way in which I have been used, I have some claim to speak first."

He put out his hand and gripped the mantel.

"*The way in which you have been used,*" he echoed. He paused, as if to let her words sink in. It was plain that he was wholly unprepared for her attitude. "Speak, by all means," he said at last. It was evidently difficult for him to confine himself to those few words.

She pointed to a small easy chair close to the fire. "Please sit down, I expect you are tired after your journey, and I would not enter into this explanation now were it not that I am pressed for time——"

"Pressed for time? Oh, I see, you have to change——"

"No. Not that; but I am leaving this house in an hour's time."

He started violently. "What?"

"You have stolen a march on me by coming back unexpectedly," said Val. "Had you not done this, I could have spared you a scene which is, I suppose, painful to us both. But as you have surprised me here, I have things to say which must be said."

"And so have I, by Jove!" he cried out, stung to the quick.

"You may leave it all unsaid, for it cannot affect me. Please sit down. Please."

Thus urged, he complied; but his wife remained standing.

"I want you to understand quite definitely," she said quietly, "that although I promised nearly three years ago to be your wife, I now decline to fulfil my promise. I do so upon the ground that my vows

were made under a total misapprehension. When I married you, I was under the delusion that you loved me——”

He broke in hurriedly. “Val—let me speak—indeed there were excuses for me.”

“There were strong excuses for you,” she replied. “At least half the original misunderstanding was due to my own stupidity. Miss Kirby also was partly to blame. She had brought me up too young for my age. I was a simple soul, content with very simple pleasures. I never saw any men, and I developed absurdly late. Miss Kirby owns it now. She knows that if I had been a normal girl of nineteen, I should not for a moment have supposed that my mother could be right when she told me that you had fallen in love with me. I know that I, to put it bluntly, threw myself at your head, and that it must have been difficult for you to know what to do——”

“But surely, Val, if you admit all this——”

“I do admit it. You were in a fix, and there were two courses open to you. Either you could cut the knot by telling me the truth, which would have hurt me sorely at the time, but would have been a temporary sorrow; or you could shoulder the consequences of your mistake—for I still hold that the situation was in part your own fault——”

“I admit that—freely—but——”

“But you chose neither of these courses, which would, though difficult, have been alike honourable. You chose the dishonourable third course, of offering

the shadow and cheating me of the substance. You lied to me, and left me to find out that you had done so, partly from my mother's unguarded words on my dreadful wedding day, and partly from the newspapers. You had to choose between accepting me and rejecting me. You had courage for neither. What you gave with one hand you took away with the other, leaving me to fare as I could, to make the best of an intolerable state of things. When you had been gone three months I discovered—through the newspapers—that you had lied when you gave me to understand that duty called you away from me. And since you came out of hospital you have left me to all the ignominy of having everyone know more of your doings than your own family knows—of being repeatedly asked when you were coming home and being unable to reply; of knowing that all the other surviving members of your band were home months ago; of seeing the Press and the country humming with the record of what you have done, while any, even the most formal account of it, was withheld from your wife."

What she said seemed to leave him bereft of speech. Leaning forward in his chair he propped his elbows on his knees and dropped his forehead in his hands. After a pause, of which he made no use, she went on.

"That is my indictment. I think you—even you—must see how abhorrent any idea of a reconciliation between us must be to me. Now hear my account of myself. From the day we parted I have

never used one penny of your money. I found that my father had in his will left me a thousand pounds, to be paid over on my marriage. I had also the Grange and its income. Out of this money I have paid my university fees, and the upkeep of the Grange, and I have also paid Miss Kirby for my board during the weeks—there have not been many—which I have spent in this house. I have used my time in qualifying to earn my own living and by the end of this summer I shall be ready to do so. I thank God humbly for the financial independence which enables me to say to you that I refuse altogether to acknowledge, as binding upon me, vows which should never have been made. As you doubtless know, my attitude of complete repudiation leaves you free to have our marriage annulled. I think you will agree that in these circumstances it would be highly unfitting for me to pass even one night under the same roof with you; so I will bid you good-bye. Miss Kirby will stay with you until the end of the school holidays, after which she will come to the Grange to keep house for me."

He raised his head from his hands, which he wrung together while he looked her fixedly in the face. Then he rose to his feet, put his hands behind him and confronted her.

"Well," said he hesitatingly, "I came to this interview prepared to humble myself pretty thoroughly. I knew that I had behaved badly and that I needed forgiveness. The thorough nature of your revenge, however, almost makes me feel as if you had suc-

ceeded in getting all of your own back. If I have humiliated you, as you say, all that you have suffered will be like nothing at all in face of my humiliation if you carry out your threat and leave me."

"Please do not speak of threats. I took my decision more than two and a half years ago. It was my intention never to see you again. Had you given notice of your coming, you would not have found me here. I never come but in the Christmas and Easter vacations, and then only because I cannot live at the Grange quite alone. Had you ever manifested the smallest interest in me or my plans, I would have prepared you for this. I would have told you by letter all that I have now been forced to tell you face to face. I cannot see how I am humiliating you, except perhaps in your own eyes. In these cases it is always the woman upon whom any humiliation falls. I shall have that to face, with the rest; but I would accept even that sooner than stay with you."

"Thank you. Perhaps you have not considered——" he broke off bitterly. "I see I have only myself to blame. If I had explained——"

"Explained? What was there to explain?"

"Val, you perhaps—I should say most probably—do not in the least realise the difference between yourself as you are now and the girl to whom I imagined myself married. The Valery whom I left behind would have taken no interest in my affairs——"

"Would she not? You little know——"

"I expect I misjudged you. You were so behind-hand as far as sex was concerned that I imagined the whole of you was as half-baked as your sentimentality. I see how egregiously wrong I was. . . . You have succeeded in setting my misdeeds before me in a way which may be salutary though it is certainly painful; but in one respect you are mistaken. You speak as though you were certain of my acquiescence in your desertion of me. That is not so. Before we part, I ask to be allowed to make my position clear, as you have made yours."

She made a slight gesture of assent. She was still on her feet, erect and defiant, but while he spoke his last words she had grown very pale, and a slight shudder ran through her. Her mien had changed from that of one easily mistress of herself to that of one summoning all her powers of self-control. For the force of the blow she had dealt him was painfully obvious. Thin as he looked, so that his dinner-jacket hung loosely on his shoulders, darkened though his fair skin still was by the pitiless equatorial sunshine, he yet preserved those distinguished good looks which would be his to the end of life. His blue eyes looked bluer than ever, set in the tanned face; and since they were set under more hollow brows they had an appeal which in old days was not discernible. Had he known it, he was a more formidable menace to her resolution as he sat there silent, choosing his line of argument, than he was when at last he spoke.

"I married you because I felt that to leave you on your mother's hands would be even more cruel

than to take you away from her; for I could give you my position though I could not, then, give you my heart. I was badly cornered. I was not ready to face the consequences of the thing that had happened to me. But I thought it very probable that I never should be called upon to face them. It seemed to me almost certain that I should not come back at all; that, even if I succeeded in finding Hal-i-Mor, I should leave my bones in the sand. It was better in that case, for you to be my widow—with a position, some money, and, above all things, your own mistress—than to be left with your mother, who would have thrown you off in order to make her marriage with Jerrold. It was a bad business, but I gambled on the unlikelihood of my return; and the number has turned up, after all. I *have* come back; and during my absence you have grown from a rather awkward, shy girl into a beautiful and charming woman. I can speak to you as to one who understands; and I ask you, humbly but very urgently, not to leave me. I am sincerely sorry for having deceived you; and still more sorry for my recent neglect, the importance of which I do not think I realised until you pointed it out to me. Stay here on your own terms, but stay—give me a chance . . . a chance to show you——”

To his own consternation his voice faltered.

“You are asking me,” she said in low, hurried tones, “you have the assurance to ask me to go on with this life of dry husks—to keep up this empty pretence which I have endured like a prisoner’s chains for nearly three years——”

"No! I am asking you only to give me a chance—to let me show you something of myself; to—to face the possibility——"

"There is no possibility," she broke in, "and you know in your heart that there is none. You care no more for me than you do for the labourers on your estate—less, indeed, for if you neglect them they murmur; and I—until to-day I have not murmured. You suggest that I face a certain possibility. I suggest that *you* face the other side, not merely the possibility but the extreme probability—the all but certainty—that nothing could come of your plan . . . and by that time it would be too late. You would have chained me to my oar for ever. No, Colonel Caron. There is but one course for you and me, and that is to say good-bye at once, and go out of each other's lives without ill-feeling."

He rose from his chair and stood beside her on the hearth. Gripping the mantel with one hand, he stooped his tall head over her.

"That is your final answer? Valery—two years ago, you loved me. You adored me——"

"No! I adored love." She broke in vehemently. "Of you, I know nothing at all. I thought you were love. That has been my only crime. I mistook good-humoured contempt for love——"

"And now you no longer feel that you could keep the vows you made?"

"As I told you at the beginning of this dreadful talk, I have not the slightest intention of keeping them. You can free yourself as soon as you like. To put it in the plainest way—I refuse to have

anything to do with you. And now," she went on, as a gong rumbled in the hall, "we must break off this futile discussion. I have to get to Peterborough to-night, and I want to do it in three hours——"

"Peterborough? There's no train?"

"Of course not. I'm going in my car."

"Alone?" he was so surprised that he hardly knew what he said.

"Oh no. My Oxford friend, Madge Burton, who roomed with me, is staying here, and she will go with me. Lyndsay wanted to, but I told him he must stay with you."

"It would be better for me and Adney to take the next train back to town."

"Of course not! That is out of the question. You are tired and not yet strong. Besides, this is your home,—you must stay here. Madge and I will enjoy the night run. We have done it before."

"True. I know from my own experience how well you drive in the dark," he murmured; and as he spoke all in a moment the memory of that spring night came back to him. He smelt the fragrance of the primrose and bluebell-studded lanes and saw the over-arching mystery of stars, while a girl drove swiftly between narrow limits, the light of her lamps dancing on the hedge-rows.

"Val!" he cried urgently, and caught her hands. "Oh, Val, for pity's sake——"

He felt her stiffen and withdraw. "Good-bye, Colonel Caron," said she; and in a moment she was gone.

CHAPTER XIX

FACING THE MUSIC

HERE, old man, we're still waiting dinner for you," said Lyndsay, coming in concernedly, half an hour later.

Caron roused himself from his trance-like torpor. "Has she gone?" he asked.

"Val? Yes, Madge and she had some food earlier, and they're off. Got to make Peterborough, and they'll have a coldish drive. Not that that matters to them, the rascals; and it's a clear, dry night. Good going."

"Who is in the dining-room besides yourself?"

"Only Kirdles. Pull yourself together and come in."

He held out his hands to help Caron to his feet, but was ignored.

"Cheerio, old son," he adjured him. "You'll be no end bucked to-morrow when you think that the knot's cut. I dare say Val made you feel a bit as if she'd been pouring boiling lead down on you through the machicolations; but you'll soon get over that. She's a plucky little girl, and really, you know, the only thing to do was to take the bull by the horns."

"She has done her work very thoroughly, Lyn.

Very thoroughly indeed. She's broken me, with a vengeance."

"Broken you? How do you make that out?"

"Try to realise my position. I have, of course, been aware that the moment I set foot in England, it would mean three months at least during which I should never be out of the limelight. I stayed abroad with that idea at the back of my mind; that I must not come back until I was ready to stand it all." He gave a bitter little laugh. "I have accepted a command to bring my wife to Buckingham Palace. I have accepted an offer from Lady Dagnall to present her at Court. I actually—in my hotel yesterday—allowed a pressman to photograph that picture of her for his paper. You will divine that if I, the man of the moment, were to bring a suit for nullity, the entire gutter Press would leap upon it. She would be pursued to Grendon—snapshotted—her name bandied about in every dirty little rag in the country. Did you think of all that, I ask you, when you advised her to shake off the dust of her feet against me?"

Lyn looked really startled.

"I—no, of course I never considered all that for a moment. Not that it is true to say I advised her. She has taken other advice—legal—" "

"The deuce she has!"

"Yes. Of course they told her that the thing must come from you, since it is she who is the deserter—she who declines to carry out her contract."

"Certainly it is she. I came home prepared to lay my laurels, such as they are, at her feet——"

"I'm awfully sorry for that," said Lyn dejectedly. "Of course, I thought, as she thought, and Miss Kirby thought, that you'd be only too pleased that she should shoulder the responsibility of the inevitable rupture. We pictured you as heaving a sigh of relief; except that, of course, it's rough on you to lose Kirdles; but you couldn't expect her to stay with you and let her ewe lamb, whom you had deserted, live alone—could you?"

"May I remind you, Lyn, that you aided and abetted me in my desertion of my bride?"

"*Touché*," replied Lyn at once. "I regret it in some ways, though latterly I have been thinking that it was the best thing that could have happened—the only way of undoing the mistake; all the same, it nearly killed her, you know."

"Nearly killed her? What are you talking about?"

Lyn looked doubtfully at him. "I very nearly wrote to you at the time, only I was afraid of making things worse——"

"Tell me now, for pity's sake——"

Lyn accordingly proceeded to tell him—hesitatingly at first, but in view of the absorbed interest of the listener, with increasing fluency—the story of this modern Ariadne in Naxos; how very nearly Valery had cut her marriage knot by death, and how valiantly she had afterwards taken up the burden of her wrecked life and fed her mind to com-

pensate her starved heart. "I tell you," he said, "I soon got to feel that there was nothing I wouldn't do for her, and we have grown to be real friends, almost as if I was her brother. But I could never get her to speak of you—even to mention your name, except in the most formal way, until a few weeks ago, when it was a question of where to spend Easter. She wrote to me then and said that she thought she ought to warn me that she had no intention of holding to the present position, and that her lawyer had told her that in that case she must be careful not to remain in the same house with you. She did not want to come here at all this vac., but I over-persuaded her, because of the Point-to-Point races. She is so keen upon horses and enjoyed it so much last year. We argued that you would certainly give us at least a week's notice if you were returning, and as she had her car here, that left plenty of time for her to clear out. I don't think she has ever for a moment considered the publicity. They don't make much in the papers over nullity suits, unless they have to do with celebrities."

"Well," said Caron, "she has been badly used. I own up to that. But she's got her revenge all right. I'm broken."

Lyn thrust his hands deep in his pockets and knit his brows. "Isn't that exaggeration? Public opinion has changed a good deal of late years, you know. It always seems to me that everybody who is much before the public turns out to have some complication in their domestic relations. If you've

dared the desert and discovered a city, nobody minds if you beat your wife."

"The smart set may not; probably they don't. They live in glass-houses," replied Caron. "But the great heart of the people still turns against the man who deserted his young wife—or girl-wife, I believe that's the Press term—on her wedding-day. All that would inevitably be made public, and I—they've approached me already about standing for the Marterstead division at the forthcoming by-election, which is to be in June. If all this comes out, I must decline to stand. I shouldn't have a dog's chance."

Lyn's face had grown very long. "Did you put all this to Val?" he asked after a pause.

Caron, who had risen to his feet and was staring into the fire, turned to him with a sound of derision.

"What! Beg her to stay here against her will, because her presence suited my convenience? So likely, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't mind betting that she has never seen it from this angle at all."

"Probably not. My career, my future, is nothing to her. She has turned me down, and that's the end of it. I wish to God I had never come out of that beastly hospital at Tahoura."

Lyn flung himself into a chair, frowning with concentration. A slight diversion was effected by the entrance of the parlour-maid and Adney, bearing the colonel's dinner on a tray.

"Miss Kirby thought that she had better send

you in something to eat, as you don't feel equal to coming into the dining-room, sir," said Adney. "I've made bold to open a bottle of champagne, for I think you're very tired; but you must try and eat something."

His wistful voice and manner drew an unwilling smile from Caron. "All right. Thanks. The champagne was excess of zeal, but I dare say Mr. Eldrid will help me with it," he said.

The clear soup looked very tempting, and he was the better for it. Lyn felt so sorry for him that he sat beside him and diverted his attention for awhile by chattering about the day's racing. By dint of putting various carefully framed questions, he also drew from him a little information concerning his own recent proceedings; and thus succeeded in beguiling him into eating something which might be called a meal.

Adney, who was waiting on his master, cast grateful glances at Lyndsay; and presently, when the young man was called up on the telephone and had to leave the room, the servant followed him, waited until he had finished speaking, and then waylaid him.

"Forgive me, sir, Gawd knows I don't want to presume, but he's more to me than my own skin, by a long chalk. Tell me, is something wrong between him and Mrs. Caron?"

Lyndsay hesitated. "There's a hitch somewhere, Adney," replied he after awhile, "but it's not for discussion among yourselves, you know."

Adney's growl of scorn was ferocious. "See me

giving him away to a lot of fatheads, don't you?" he spat out contemptuously. "But what is it—can't you do anything?"

"I don't know. I think I'll have a try," replied Lyn thoughtfully, "but it may not come to anything after all, so what you have to do is to keep your tongue between your teeth, pretend to him that everything's all right, keep him going, see? By any means in your power. If you've got any bromide, and could administer it without his knowing he's taking it, give it, and let him have a long night's rest."

"Right you are, sir. If you knew what he's come through you'd wonder to see him walking about and keeping his end up at all. I tell you straight, his bones was through his skin, where they'd manacled him, and he was a mass of sores—you'd ought to see the scars on him."

"Jove! Poor lad!"

"And them dirty Dagoes are after him now, that's more. Because he routed up that perishin' city of theirs where they'd got Lord knows what filth and horrors hidden away. He wants me to go down to Kent on my holiday, but I'm not going, no, not even if he fires me, so I tell you straight! He was foller'd, in Rome, and the beast got as far as the frontier, but luckily they turned him back there, him not knowing he had to get a passport into France. But that won't be their only attempt, not by a long chalk, and, of course, every word he says and everything he does and will do

next week will be in the papers for their information —oh, I tell you it's not all beer and skittles, going grubbing into them Dago middens."

Lyndsay felt a warm impulse of friendship for this man.

By questioning, he elicited a flood of information as to the unquestioned heroism of Carfrae's exploits.

"I did think he'd come home to a bit of peace—he was that taken up with her photo in Rome," sighed Adney. "Amused me to see him buy fine handkerchiefs and new boots and shoes and so on in Paris—got so particular all of a sudden, he did, fussing with his shirts and things, nothing 'ud please him. If she's biffed him he'll take it hard; he will that; and if ever a man was faithful . . . well, sir, you know what some are, when they're out and away from civilisation like that; but him—not a skirt from start to finish! What more can she want, I ask you?"

CHAPTER XX

LYNDSAY WAVERS

LYNDSAY walked very gravely back into the smoking-room where Carfrae still sat, leaning forward, elbow on knee, chin propped on hand, gazing into the fire.

The yellow mop of the painter was all standing on end as it usually did when anything ruffled his sunny temperament. He was completely upset by the manner in which the husband had taken the news. Some surprise he had expected, some offence perhaps, but he had secretly felt sure that relief would have been the sensation which emerged finally on the top.

Viewing the situation from Carfrae's standpoint, he could see that the blow was a far heavier one than he had foreseen, and its results more far-reaching. What he wanted to know was, whether this was all; whether the public humiliation was the extent of Car's trouble. Sitting down, he lit his dirty disreputable old pipe, locked his hands round his knees and silently smoked awhile. Presently he said:

"I think perhaps that Valery ought to have your side of the question laid before her."

Carfrae merely shook his head without replying.

"If she thought—if she knew—that she was spoil-

ing your prospects—doing you public damage—she might reconsider the position."

"I should not wish it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I can't add anything to the suffering which I find I have already caused her. As she says that nothing would induce her to—to be my wife in reality—well! That's that, isn't it?"

A long pause. "How does she strike you, Car? What do you think of her?" asked Lyn at last.

"Think of her? Why, she's wonderful. She is like the woman one has sometimes dreamed of and never met. Is she really all that she seems?"

"Oh, a good deal more. I should say her only fault—almost her only fault—is that she's a bit hard; and that's not to be wondered at. She had to drink a bitter cup, poor kid. First her mother, whom she idolised, let her down; and then you. She's clever, she's attractive, and in spite of everything she's healthy-minded too; but hard. . . . No use to appeal to her emotions; certainly not where you are concerned. She's wrapped up in Lance, though. I hope you won't forbid him to see her."

Carfrae laughed contemptuously. "Much difference my forbidding or permitting would make! I don't know if I'm on my head or my heels. Has a husband no authority at all in these days? Is marriage nothing but an agreement which either can break at pleasure? By Jove!" he broke out with a sudden fury which was surprising, "it makes one

wish it were a hundred years ago! I'd teach her her duty!"

Lyn considered him out of the corner of his eye.
"Would you whip her?" he asked.

"God knows! I'd break her somehow!"

"But, Car, let me understand. You are not seriously telling me that if it were in your power you'd take her against her will? Consider, now. You don't care a snap about her really. You want to have her about to show to people—but in a few months' time—when you are safely in Parliament, when your lionising is over, and you want to settle down, what would you do with her?"

"How do you know I don't care for her?"

"Because you can't. You almost loathed her when you married her, and since that you haven't seen her."

"Well, perhaps that's why——"

"You mean that, simply because she won't have anything to say to you, you want to break her resistance? Well, but afterwards? When you had done that—if you could do it, which I doubt—what then?"

"Oh, stop it, Lyn, confound you!"

"I only want to understand the position," replied Lyn meekly.

"I imagine," presently remarked Caron, "that there is in me something which prevents any woman from giving me her devotion. Certainly Blanche never did; but you know—absurdly, I had been banking upon Valery! I thought she would fall into

my arms, and that I—well, that I should be jolly glad to have her there."

Lyn puffed silently. Then: "I'll talk to Kirdles, and tell her to write and put the public side of this thing before Valery."

"No use to do that. I have to give my answer to the association on Thursday. No, Lyn, I'm broke. I'll stay here to-night because it's late, but to-morrow Adney and I must pack up and clear out. I'll go back to the Riviera—health's quite a good excuse; and cancel all engagements." He laughed bitterly. "And I was looking forward to a summer at home . . . A summer at home . . . for once in my life!"

"I should like you to promise me," said Lyn, "that you'll stay here until Thursday morning."

"What's the good of that?"

"I think the case ought to be laid before Valery more fully than it seems to have been by you."

"That will do no good; all the same, I think it would perhaps be wiser to stay here till Thursday—it will look more as if I had come home, intending to stay, and had to flee on account of the diabolical weather or the low temperature, or something. By the way, there's still a chance for her to be free without any suits being brought. The Halis, as they call themselves, didn't get me in Chugga, but they have warned me that they mean to. They told me that my being in Europe wouldn't stop 'em; and they did set a merchant to follow me about in Rome."

"But, Car, this sounds to me very rum. Adney told me something of it. But savages like that—a desert tribe—they haven't the money nor the ability to track you to England."

"Oh, haven't they? Much you know about it. That's one thing about going on a job like mine—it does teach you. We think we know such a lot, but we are fools—children—to the men who have owned Hal-i-Mor ever since the Romans deserted it: let alone the fact that they're hand and glove with Germany."

"That's true, then?"

"Very true. The Hun archæologists have been after Hal-i-Mor for years."

"But the French didn't have this kind of trouble over Timgâd?"

"Naturally not. Timgâd is in French territory, not the sacred property of a desert people who look upon it as miraculous. The Halis sincerely believe that Hal-i-Mor was built by the gods when they dwelt among men; and we sent an armed expedition to hunt for it! No wonder they laid hands on us. You see, they had the lot of us shut up there, and I didn't see how any help was going to reach us in time. The only way I could devise to save our skins was to pretend to magic powers! I resorted to the old dodge, used in 'King Solomon's Mines'—the eclipse. It just chanced that there was quite a good one, though we had to wait nearly nine months for it. I prophesied the invasion of their country by a force a hundred times larger than their own army,

and said that it would be heralded by darkness. When the first part of my rede came true, they bundled us out like Pharaoh of old. And now they think I can control the powers of heaven, and that it isn't healthy for them to have me alive. I am going to watch out, and I went yesterday to Scotland Yard, to tell them to be very sharp over passports and landing permits. However, perhaps I had better relax precautions, and contrive not too obviously to let them get me. I think I'd rather do that, and die for my country in a blaze of glory, than see myself bringing a suit for nullity—which, by the way, my girl-wife talks about as calmly as a summons for non-payment of rent."

"Valery's modern. You can't put the clock back."

"Modern, indeed! And I'm ancient, not to say primitive. Lord! How ancient I feel! A Stone Age man! I should like to take her and crush her, and show her who was master!"

"Then"—hesitatingly—"she wouldn't be safe here? I mean, suppose, for the sake of argument, that she consented to come back and stay in the house in order to keep up appearances? You couldn't promise—couldn't guarantee to leave her in peace——"

"Look here, Lyndsay, drop it!" shouted Carfrae, his eyes afire. "Drop it, can't you? Mayn't I rave a little? Do you expect me to be chucked as I've been chucked to-day—kicked as I've been kicked to-day—and take it without a word? . . . But

I'm not a cad, although she thinks so, and although you apparently think so too! No—not a word! I feel as if I should choke with all the things I want to say, and can't say! You've been disloyal—you've rounded on me—you are on her side, and Kirby's on her side, and, I suppose, I shall find that all my three children are on her side too——”

“But for pity's sake, Carfrae, what's the trouble? You have only got what you've asked for! You longed to shake off Valery—it was your one desire —what do you suppose she has been thinking, all this time that you've been dancing about Italy, without even the courtesy to tell her where you were? You *must* have done that on purpose to show her that she was less than nothing to you; and now, simply because you find that she agrees with you, you fling yourself into a rage like this——” he broke off, horrified at the pallor of Caron's face, the blue fury of his eyes, the drawn back lips and set jaws. “Forgive me,” he stammered. “I know it must have been pretty awful for you, being told off by her. I tell you, I should just hate to incur her contempt. Look here, forget it. Go to bed and have a thorough good rest. I'm going to talk to Kirby; she has any amount of sense.”

CHAPTER XXI

VALERY HESITATES

IN the warm wet woods the fragrance of primroses floated to heaven like incense. The spaces wherein las autumn undergrowth had been cut down were starred with clusters of pale bloom. Down in the rocky bed of the river, moving warily along a ledge, Val was gathering handfuls of them, while Madge Burton, sketching-block on knee, sat halfway up the steep bank, busily recording an impression of "the primrose by the river's brim."

The east wind had ceased and a warm zephyr from the south breathed over the enchanted earth, the sun was beginning to decline towards the west, and the light to take on colour as the shadows lengthened.

"It strikes me," came Val's clear voice, "that we had better be thinking of getting home to tea."

"No good, Val. I am not going to stir for the next twenty minutes, so make up your mind to it. This is really coming—one of my lucky days—and they're not so plentiful that I can afford to ignore them."

Val lightly scrambled up to the level whereat Madge was seated, and gazed at the bold and vivid bit of colour.

"You're right. It's good," said she, as one whose opinion makes a thing certain. "No green could scream too loudly to be like those lime buds; and you've got the tone of the rocks—they are really wet; and I can see through the water; it's transparent. You're coming on, my dear. But I knew Grendon would inspire you. Not a bad old spot, is it?"

"Lucky woman! To own a bit of earth of your very own! I wish I were ever likely to do so."

"Yes," said Val thoughtfully, "in some ways, I suppose, I have been fortunate. For instance, suppose that mother had taken a fancy to the Grange and had wanted to live in it. What a relief, by the by, that she and Sir Otho are not expected back here for ages. Going to town when they get back from Sicily."

"Yes," replied Madge, who was in her friend's confidence, "that's another big piece of luck for you. Lady Jerrold would certainly have wanted to have a finger in the pie when you suddenly arrived here on the very day after your husband's return."

Val laughed softly.

"I did wipe the floor with him," she remarked, speaking with a primrose in her charming mouth, held by the stalk. "Isn't it odd how a man, the moment he finds he can't have a thing, immediately begins to want it? I must own I was surprised at the way he took it. I expected him to be hardly able to throw a decent veil over his delight; but, on the contrary, he was badly rattled. However,

by this time he will have got over that, and be thanking me on his knees for taking the initiative."

"I wish I had seen him," said Madge regretfully. "Of course, he is the kind of man I always admire—sort of Sir Richard Burton fellow. How did he look?"

"He looked ill. There is no doubt he really has been very bad. I had been wondering if there was any truth at all in it, or whether his illness was faked in order to keep himself away from me; but he has manifestly been through a great deal since I saw him last. In the days of my calf-love, he was one of those men who look as if they came out of a box—always erect, trim, clean, well, never an eyelash out of place. His hair seemed as if it could never change, a dull, tarnished gold with a kink in it, which would show on the temples, when he had been a week away from the haircutter. Now there is a little frost on it, but he isn't a bit bald. He is tremendously tanned—I wonder if it will ever disappear? And he is thin and his cheeks are sunken, and his eyesockets deeper than they were."

"He sounds very fascinating to me."

"Yes. I have that much justification. When he came into the room I was quite keen to know whether he was as handsome as I had thought him in the throes of my first green pash; and I came to the conclusion that he was the kind of man that a girl might quite easily make herself a fool over."

"And now he's a hero into the bargain."

"No man is a hero to the woman he deserts."

"I don't agree; it only makes some women cling the more."

"Perhaps he expected me to be like that. Well, if so, he got the surprise of his life."

"Poor fellow!"

"He's not to be pitied. By this time I expect he's dancing a jig with pleasure. Oh! Talking of jigs reminds me! You and I were both engaged to go and have tea with the Spanish ladies at the Dairy Lodge this afternoon! I forgot all about it! I do wonder if Kirdles will remember to send them word! They will just have got their kettle boiling and be sitting up in their best clothes, waiting for us."

"Funny old things! I did want to go and air my rudimentary Spanish," avowed Madge with a touch of regret. "What a nuisance husbands are!"

"Oh, not if you understand how to make 'em keep their distance," boasted Val lazily. "Fancy those old Miss La Placis liking to live in that funny little house, right in the country!" she went on. "Such good tenants, we were lucky to find them! You know, it was Kirdles' idea to speculate in having the cottage done up and furnished in the latest cottage chintzes and fake oaks; and now she is getting quite a big rental for it. She is a wonder, isn't she?"

"Well, you know, she has you and Mr. Eldrid to help her. It was he who did up that cottage so artistically that nobody could resist it."

"I think it was the secret chamber that did the

business with those funny old things. They have a great idea of rural England, and when Kirdles showed them that curious little door behind the ingle-nook, they were overjoyed. Remind me this evening to write them a line of apology, saying I was suddenly called away."

As she spoke there came through the woods the sound of a musical call. "Well," said Val, sitting upright and dropping her primrose, "if I didn't know he was two or three hundred miles away I should say that was Lyn."

She listened, and the call was repeated. It sounded nearer. Raising her voice, she replied with a call of three notes; and there came back the answer, the two final notes of the call they always used.

"*It is Lyn!* Has Carfrael turned him out of house and home, and is he come to beg the hospitality of the Grange?"

She sprang to her feet and beheld Lyn coming through the purple-brown branches of the as yet leafless willows, a-glisten with gold and silver catkins.

He waved his hand as soon as he saw her, and his first words were in his own vein.

"I say, I took a ticket to Westmorland this morning and they've made a mistake and put me out at Paradise."

"It is pretty lovely, isn't it?" said Val, scanning his face for some reason for this sudden appearance. "But I wish you had waited for your translation just

a day or two, as our particular mansion in Paradise is not ready for our reception, our apotheosis being unexpected; and Mrs. Pearce gave us some cold chicken and bundled us out to picnic while she swept and garnished."

"It's all right, Val. I've not come to stay. I told Mrs. Pearce I shouldn't want a bed. I've come for a talk with you, and if you'll stroll with me along this path I think we may as well begin it now."

Val glanced swiftly at Madge and shook her head. "If you have come to talk me into changing my mind," said she, "you have wasted a return ticket, Lyn."

He eyed her keenly. "I have no intention of saying one single word of persuasion, Mrs. Caron. I have come here to put you in possession of various facts which I think you should know, and with which no one has made you acquainted."

Val shrugged and looked obstinate. "I should think it took you the whole day in the train to compose that sentence," said she flippantly. "You must have got up early this morning."

But she turned her back on Madge and strolled off with him.

"Now," said Lyn, "I suppose that you will admit that this affair between you and Car is an affair for your two selves only?"

"I not only admit that, Lyn. I insist upon it," she returned softly.

"All right. Then, if you were to find out that you are mistaken in that idea, and that the matter

is far more serious and more complicated than you suppose, you might possibly have to reconsider your position. I mean this. When Car went off and left you, his action was humiliating for you, and in the very small circle of people that knew that Valery Knight existed. But it was not a national affair. The newspapers did not ring with your name, nor was your social position attacked and rendered untenable. You were not held up to popular odium——”

“You suggest that this would happen to Carfrae as a result of my refusal to live in his house?”

“Yes, I do suggest it.” He pointed out, shortly but vividly, what the position was. “What I want you to understand is,” he concluded, “that, if you persist in your present course of action, you will do infinitely more harm to Car than he ever did to you. I don’t say you would not be justified, but I do think you ought to know what you’re doing.”

“And I suppose, the moment I had gone, he got hold of you and urged you to take his part—to plead with me——”

Lyndsay laughed. “I told him I thought he had a strong case, and asked him why he had not put his side of the matter before you. Shall I tell you what his answer was: ‘*What! Ask her to stay with me against her will because her presence would suit my convenience? So likely, isn’t it?*’ ”

The colour rushed to Val’s cheeks, and water to her eyes. She clenched her hands. “He said that? It was generous. I’ll admit it. But, Lyn,” she

burst out piteously, "what am I to do? That's my difficulty! What am I to do? You know perfectly well that I don't want to be a cat. If my being there, in the house, would help him, as he thinks, to a seat in Parliament, and so on, I'd do that much for him, like a shot. But you can see for yourself that, if I do it, he has got me caught in the toils. I could never get out after that—and think of a whole lifetime spent in avoiding one another, except for the occasions on which we must be seen together? . . . Oh, Lyn, Lyn, after all, I have only one life, just as he has. Is his life so much more valuable than mine, that I should be expected to sacrifice my whole future to it? Is that fair to me, is it just? I am not asked only to surrender every hope a woman has—love, motherhood, companionship—but my University degree—my hope of independence—just to secure his social position—his, the man who never for one moment considered me——"

Lyndsay made no reply. He was not looking at her, but away, over the beauty of the land.

"Well," she gasped, at last. "I suppose my life isn't, after all, of such unutterable importance; but it's the only one I've got——" she broke off, quivering, for under his breath Lyn had murmured, "Is it?"

"*Other heights in other lives, God willing,*" muttered the young man shyly.

Valery flashed a glance at him and stood immovable, making no reply at all. At last——

"It's so easy to advise self-sacrifice to other

people, isn't it?" she said, in an unreal voice, provocative, miserable.

"I've given no such advice. No advice of any kind," he replied steadily. "I came here to tell you facts, not to argue, or persuade. I only thought you ought to have the whole case put before you. There's one other thing to mention, and then I've done."

"Mention away," she challenged him derisively.

"Car goes in danger of his life, according to Adney, and I don't think Adney's a scaremonger."

"In danger of his life! From whom, pray?"

"From this tribe, the Halis of the Chugga country, the people who guard Hal-i-Mor."

"You mean he *was* in danger of his life when he was out there among them?"

"I mean he is at the present moment, or may be shortly, here in England. Hal-i-Mor is a sacred city. So far as can be ascertained, the present tribe have been in possession ever since the Romans evacuated it. True, the greater part of it is under sand, but those sites which have been preserved are guarded with the utmost rigour. The point is, however, that these people are far more formidable than one would suppose. It seems they have always been secretly in touch with Egypt, all down the centuries, in spite of the thousand miles of desert between. They have heard of the loosening of British control in Egypt. They have also heard of the desecration, at the hands of the English, of the carefully hidden tomb of Tutankhamen. They are so rich as to sug-

gest that they must possess secret hoards of ancient treasure; and they think we mean to have this. They believe Car to have magic powers because he predicted an eclipse. They want to kill him because they fear him."

"But why does Carfrae think that they are after him? Has he been followed?"

"He was, in Rome. The man tracking him got turned back at the frontier; but neither he nor Adney seem to think it at all unlikely that he or someone like him may turn up in Hertfordshire. That would cut the knot for you, wouldn't it? If they get him? And in England an assassin has a clear field so long as he doesn't mind whether he is caught or no. The Halis, being fanatics, probably would be quite indifferent to punishment."

"Does he take any precaution?"

"Adney does. He won't let him go anywhere alone; and I fancy they are both armed; but Carfrae said last night after you had gone that he thought the easiest way out would be to relax all precautions and let them pick him off. He wanted to leave Archwood then and there, but I persuaded him to stay a few days, if only for the look of the thing."

"Aster comes home on Thursday, and the boys on Friday," murmured Valery, her eyes full of thoughts. There was another long pause, which Lyn made no attempt to break. He pulled out his tobacco pouch and filled his abominable old pipe with care.

"Suppose," burst out Val suddenly, "suppose

that I were to say that I would do what you suggest——”

“Val! I haven’t suggested a thing——”

“Suppose I do what you evidently consider would be the decent thing—fling away my whole future for the sake of Carfrae’s seat in Parliament—for that’s what it amounts to—what security have I that he would keep to—to any agreement we might make? On what terms should I go back? Could you make him understand that my feeling is entirely unchanged, that if I come it is stipulated that neither now nor at any future time does he make any attempt to change our footing? Not that I can suppose he would ever wish to do so; but one never knows. . . . Oh, Lyndsay!” suddenly the tears sprang to her eyes, ran down her cheeks, “I can’t! I really can’t! You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“For the third time, I’m not asking anything at all.”

“That’s not true—that’s not true. You’re against me! I always thought you were my friend, but the minute he comes back you turn against me——”

Lyn laughed harshly. “I’m jolly well ‘twixt hammer and anvil,” he declared with sarcasm. “Last night Carfrae bitterly accused me of being in league with you and Kirdles against him, and said he fully expected to find the children in the same camp! Jolly, isn’t it? I assure you I simply love my present errand, and am most grateful for your kind appreciation.”

Val was sobbing unashamed, her shoulders

heaved. "I'm a b-beast," she owned, "but oh, Lyn, I am so miserable. What about Kirdles? Did she know you were coming?"

"She did. She and I had a heart-to-heart talk last night—or rather in the early hours of this morning; and then she made me strong coffee and I went off to catch the market train at Marterstead. She wrote me a letter to bring to you."

"A letter? Why don't you give it me, then?"

"She said that if you came to a decision independently I was not to let you have it."

"I've come to no decision. I see no way out of this morass of misery. I only feel that you're putting pressure on me . . . that it's not fair . . . that I can't see clearly. Let me read—I want to know what she says; she is a clear-headed old soul."

"My child, I pity you from the bottom of my heart. God guide you in this decision. It does not seem to me to be a matter of right and wrong, but rather a question of your own inmost feeling. There is no easy way out of such a dilemma. I foresee much difficulty, and I fear also much unhappiness for you, whichever course you take; but, judging from my knowledge of you and your temperament, I think perhaps you will be unhappier in repudiating your husband than you could be in sacrificing your own future to his.

"Whichever way you decide, I shall do all in my power to uphold and support you. Remember, I am speaking from personal experience when I assert, as

I do, that a woman's life can be very happy, even though shorn of the special kind of happiness which congenial marriage brings.

"Your loving, faithful, old

"KIRDLES."

CHAPTER XXII

ON CONDITION

IT was nearly nine o'clock on the evening of Wednesday. Dinner at Archwood was over, and Caron had, with apologies, brought himself and his pipe into the drawing-room for the sake of Miss Kirby's society.

He had spent the morning with her inspecting the accounts; and the afternoon in pottering about his property, also in her helpful society.

Owing to his protracted absence and his months of captivity, she had been obliged, with Lyndsay's full sanction, to take things into her own hands much more completely than she had expected to have to do; and it was an enormous relief to her to find what she had done approved so whole-heartedly.

The estate was small, but as they kept their own cows and made their own hay, it needed supervision. She had nothing but praise for Willis the gardener and Adams the cow-man, who with his wife managed the live-stock, churned the butter, and so on. They had much more milk, butter and garden-stuff than they themselves could consume. The remainder had been marketed, and the result was that the farm and poultry showed a balance. The unlet cottage also had been turned from an anxiety into

a source of revenue, though it had only been let within the past six months; but the first year's rent would almost compensate for the money expended upon it, since Lyndsay had amused himself with the decorative part.

"I can't think what we should have done without him. He has been the greatest help and support; just like a big brother to Valery," she said fondly.

She was surprised at herself for daring to say it; but in truth she found the colonel much gentler and more approachable than she had expected. His gratitude to her was warm, his sorrow for her forthcoming departure most sincere.

It was not until the evening that he spoke of his wife at all; but the ice once broken, he sat listening in an absorbed way to all that Kirdles would tell him about her. She held out no hopes at all that Val's attitude might change. "She was too hard hit," said she, "and her nature is very steadfast. The agony she went through seemed to sear her, and I consider her now as much too old for her age as she was ridiculously too young when you married her. Oxford always takes over and moulds a girl in an astonishing way. She is a highly finished product of her day and generation; but she has lost something that she used to have—that beautiful trust—that confidence in the good intention of others——"

He made a sound that was like a groan. "If one had a chance to atone—to let her see that I am not such a brute as I have showed myself to her . . .

but the course she has taken rules out that. Oh, I don't blame her. I realise that, feeling as she does, it was the only thing she could do ; but it makes me feel hopeless. "I"—he hesitated and could hardly bring it out—"I daren't picture what the children will say."

"Ah, indeed," she agreed sadly. "Don't think that I am not sorry for you. I am. On the other hand, I think you must admit that you have only yourself to blame."

"I suppose so," he owned heavily. "I was old enough to have been able to extricate myself and her by some other means than those I took. My one excuse is that I never supposed that this situation—my return—would arise at all, since I did not expect to come back."

As he spoke there was a sound of wheels outside. "Hark! That sounds like a car! Who can it be, so late? Driving up through the paddock and into the stable yard——"

Miss Kirby remained, a knitting needle poised in one hand, listened intently. There was a pause which lengthened itself into minutes. Then the door opened, and Lyndsay came quietly in.

"Lyndsay! Back already," she faltered, assuming his certain failure from his almost incredibly swift return.

Lyndsay went up to Carfrae and stood before him, slowly drawing off his fur-lined gloves.

"Carfrae," he said, "Valery is here."

As Caron sprang to his feet, he made a motion

for him to sit still. "She will not come in without guarantees."

"You mean," said Caron, and to Lyndsay's astonishment he could hardly articulate, "you mean that she would stay—would come back to this house if —if —"

"If you will give her your word of honour, as a gentleman, not to presume upon her action. She does not want anything in writing. She says it will be enough if you pledge your word, in the presence of myself and Kirdles, that she will be neither molested nor importuned." He drew a slip of paper from his pocket and glanced at it. "I made a memorandum here of what she asks. Shall I read it?"

Caron nodded without speaking.

"She is to live as heretofore, in her own quarters, without change. She is to undertake to appear as your wife officially, whenever occasion demands that she shall do so, to take her meals with you, and to say nothing to the children of any estrangement between you. Her leisure to be her own, and no reference to the past to be made by either of you except by mutual consent. She is to be free to come and go as she pleases, but will undertake not to absent herself when her doing so would be injurious to your political or social position."

Caron folded his arms. His gaze was fixed upon the ground.

"I can't accept it," he said gruffly. "Such an arrangement would render any subsequent suit for

nullity very difficult. This would mean that she flung away her whole future to shield me from adverse public comment. Tell her I thank her. Tell her I realise, as bitterly as she could possibly desire, the contrast between her behaviour and my own. But I can't accept."

There was a silence. "I think," said Lyndsay hesitatingly, after a while, "that she means it quite seriously. She has come back prepared to stay. Am I to send her away?"

Caron made a slight gesture of helplessness. The time of night made it difficult to turn his wife from his doors; yet . . .

Miss Kirby had been looking worried, had seemed to be at a loss, had made slight restless movements. Suddenly she stuck both pins into her ball of wool and leaned forward earnestly. She had evidently made up her mind.

"Colonel Caron," said she, "accept that offer. Valery meant it and will stand by it. I love her far better than I love anything else on earth. I would gladly die for her; and yet I advise you to let her follow the course on which she has determined. God forgive me if I'm giving wrong counsel, but I believe I am right. This is her own decision——"

Carfrae cried out: "But is it? Is it? Hasn't she been coerced? Lyndsay goes tearing after her all the way to Grendon, and exerts every art to persuade——"

"Easy on, Car. I never said one word to persuade. I wouldn't even advise. I simply laid your

side of the case before her. I wanted her to see the situation as it was, and I gave it to her as best I could. She thought it over for a couple of hours, and made her own decision."

"If I consent, she'll only think me still more contemptible a hound than she already does."

"She suggests," put in Lyndsay, "that the agreement shall last only for a year. At the end of that time it may be renewed or not, as circumstances demand."

"A year," muttered the husband. To himself he added something like this: "If I'm anything like a man, can't I woo and win her with a year's chance?" The honest grey eyes of Kirdles, studying him, read his thought as clearly as if spoken aloud. It was her thought too, but in her case it might more correctly be described as a prayer.

Caron turned to Lyndsay. "Ask my wife to come in," he said in expressionless tones. Lyndsay turned and went out. Once more there fell between the two who remained a silence unbroken by word or movement. Caron stood with his hands behind him, his back to the fire, his legs planted somewhat defiantly. With his whole being he seemed to be listening.

Lyndsay was evidently recounting the conversation, for long minutes passed by and nothing happened. Kirdles, her eyes fixed upon the colonel, wondered how long he could possibly maintain that motionless calm—or if it would be possible for a living man to grow paler than he had grown.

Then the door opened and the two travellers came in together.

Valery wore her driving suit, strapped with leather, and a leather pull-on hat, with a bit of burnished peacock's breast feather at one side. As she advanced to the hearth where Caron awaited her, it could be seen that she was as white as he. She went straight forward, however, and held out her hand to him. He took it with a start, as though he had not expected it to be offered.

"I undertake," said he without preface, "to observe all your conditions, as Lyndsay has explained them to me, in Miss Kirby's presence. They are both witnesses to the fact that I pledge myself to respect your wishes. I—I also thank you for the—the sacrifice you are making. I will do all I can to prevent it's being unendurable."

Something in his tone—a passion of regret or of tenderness which he could not repress, made her lift her heavy lids and look at him. She had been at the wheel for many hours, and had had no sleep the previous night. The acute emotion of having made her surrender, and further, of its being accepted—of finding herself again, so soon and so unexpectedly, in the house with the man who had so injured her, smote upon her fatigue and her strained nerves so strongly that she fainted away, turning from him when she felt her knees giving way, and falling into the lap of Kirdles as she lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XXIII

VALERY PLAYS UP

SO you're going to be our member," cried Sir George Bowyer, shaking hands cordially with the hero of Hal-i-Mor. "Oh, we shall get you in, never fear! You'll head the poll all right. I think that charming girl your wife would have stood a very good chance herself, if she had taken a fancy to contest the seat. Mind you put her on to speak! She addressed more than one meeting for us at the General Election last year, and she's really very good."

"Nonsense, Sir George," put in Valery quietly. She stood at her husband's side, well turned out and self-possessed. Only those who knew her well could have detected anything unnatural in her manner. "You know I'm only a beginner; but I have promised to do all I can for him."

The members of the deputation from the local organisation were standing about in the Archwood drawing-room, drinking tea, which Miss Kirby poured out, and Lyndsay helped to carry round.

Nobody could have believed that in the interval between Monday night and Wednesday night Valery had driven a car to Westmorland and back; nor that her fatigue had been so extreme that she had

been carried up to bed the previous evening, and had not made an appearance that day downstairs until half an hour before the arrival of the deputation. Her vigorous youth allowed no sign of either mental or bodily distress to appear. The colonel, on the other hand, was haggard, and there were dark marks under his eyes. He looked, as several friends declared, as though he needed the bracing air of his native county.

Hugh Hatherleigh, watching keenly, saw how hard it was for him to keep his eyes off his wife. What, he wondered, and continued to wonder, was the exact state of things between the two? Had they rushed into each other's arms? Did a mutual passion lurk under their self-contained exterior? He remarked that Mrs. Caron was wearing a long chain of rare and curiously coloured stones, evidently from Africa.

He had no chance to talk—to try and probe beneath the surface. There was a general movement of departure, and he went perforce with the others to take his leave.

"How long is Mrs. Caron's vacation?" he asked of Lyndsay who was passing near.

"Oh, haven't you heard? She's not going back to Oxford, at least not next term. She's postponing her own work to help Caron with all he has on hand. Rather fine, don't you think?"

"Fine indeed; but Mrs. Caron has always struck me as being what we understand by that word. Her husband looks to be many years older than she."

"There's a disparity, certainly, but not so great as

you might suppose. Carfrae has been at death's door in a tropical climate, and that isn't calculated to improve a man's appearance, you know. We hope a few months at home will set him up completely."

"And Mrs. Caron is surrendering her college life, which she found so delightful? I almost wonder at his accepting the sacrifice."

"Oh, we hope it isn't as bad as all that! She hopes to go up next year, and says she will be all the better for the extra time. She isn't giving up her reading. Carfrae is anxious that she should not do that. He realises that he is upsetting all her arrangements; but naturally he feels as if he could not do without her."

"Oh, naturally. Well, good-bye! I'm off."

Valery and her husband were standing together near the door, shaking hands with their departing guests. As Hatherleigh approached, she welcomed him with a smile which somewhat consoled him. "Wait a minute or two," she told him, lowering her voice, "and we'll walk down the paddock with you. The boys' train is due, and Baker has gone down to the station to collect them. They will be in a rage because I have not gone too. They don't know their father is back, it will be such a surprise for them."

Hatherleigh waited gladly enough until all the others had passed out. Valery then directed Lyndsay to go to the hall and fetch her coat; and she, Caron, Lyndsay and Hatherleigh went out through the long window in the drawing-room, upon the

terrace, and down through the garden to the small park known as the paddock.

The gravelling of the drive being not yet complete, the departing cars were all leaving by this route. To the right of the carriage road they followed was a wide grassy expanse, with various small plantations and clumps of trees; to the left a road branched off which led through the farmyard to the stables. Near the Park Gate, which opened upon a lonely road known as Moorside Lane, stood the Dairy Lodge, slightly off the path, to the left. It was looking so pretty among the budding trees and lilac bushes that Hatherleigh remarked upon it, and Val and Lyn related with glee their latest enterprise in bringing it up to date and letting it.

"It was Miss Kirby who first had the brilliant idea. She saw its possibilities, and she thought the Ideal Home stunt, brought to bear upon it, would bring us a tenant in no time. And so it did. Two old ladies who were in rooms at Marterstead, searching in vain for a house, heard about it, and they wrote to us before the cottage was ready, and took it there and then, not seeming to mind what rent we asked, so we never needed to advertise. Ah! there are the two quaint old dears coming out in their pony cart! I must go and make my apologies, because I was to have had tea with them the day before yesterday, only I had to go away unexpectedly."

The small chaise, containing two old ladies in cloaks and wide-brimmed hats, emerged slowly

from the stable gate of the Lodge and turned towards the exit from the park. Val had no difficulty in catching it up, and she greeted them first in a few words of very halting Spanish, then in English, which they spoke fluently, though with a strong accent.

"Something most exciting has just happened," she said gaily. "My husband has come home. May I present him to you, since he is your landlord?"

The wrinkled old faces beamed with smiles. "But he is a ver' great 'ero, ze Colonel Caron," said the elder one, extending a hand in a woollen glove, which she placed *upon* the colonel's, not *in* it—as if she expected to have it kissed.

They chatted for some minutes, the old dames inquiring of his return and his adventures, and Valery making her excuses for having broken her engagement with them. Then, with eagerness, but half shyly too, they wondered whether a so-great 'ero, with so many calls upon his time, would do them the great favour to accompany his wife to have tea with them one afternoon?

Caron answered for himself, in much more fluent Spanish than his wife could boast. "To tell you the truth, ladies, I have heard so much about the way your cottage has been restored, that I am really very eager to see the interior, so your invitation is most kind." He drew out a diary, in which the entries were already growing alarmingly numerous, and glanced down its pages.

They waited breathlessly, while he pondered,

finally suggesting a day about a week ahead, to which they joyfully agreed.

Hardly had their tiny conveyance gone out upon the main road, when the hum of the returning car was heard, and Baker drove in, through the gate held open by Lyndsay; and at a sign from him, stopped just inside, when immediately there tumbled out Lance and Humphrey, who with yells of joy hurled themselves upon Valery, hugging her and in the same breath claiming to know what she meant by not being at the station.

"Oh, boys, boys, give me a chance! Look round! Whom do you see?"

A moment's thrilling pause, and then the shout of "Father!"

Little Humphrey was absurdly shy, his father being practically a stranger to him; but Lance's hug was the first tribute of family affection the colonel had known since his return. He reciprocated vigorously; and, Baker being told to go ahead with the luggage, the family turned to stroll back to the house, and Hatherleigh must reluctantly take his leave. He moved off dejectedly, and as he walked along Moorside Lane outside the park fence, his eyes dwelt upon the animated group.

He watched Lance, walking with one arm in his father's and the other in his stepmother's, his face, alight with eagerness, turned first to one and then to the other; while little Humphrey held firmly to Uncle Lyn, but walked quite closely on his father's other side.

A family picture, which made the heart of the

Squire of Lannerswyck sore. As he passed out of sight he plunged his hand into his pocket and drew out a letter he had received that morning from his cousin Albinia.

"Whom should I meet here the other day in the street but Carfrae Caron! It was a surprise to both of us, and I think he felt slightly uncomfortable. He seemed to know nothing whatever of his wife and family, and to care less. However, he came to life a bit when I showed him the photo of Lyndsay's portrait of his wife. Perhaps his hardships and privations have injured his brain! But he talked coherently enough. If he has a spark of feeling for the girl, he had better be off home at once, and so I told him. Lyndsay Eldrid is a good sort, but even the staunchest friendships break down under too great a strain, don't they? And, of course, she is attractive, though not to me." . . .

Was it Albinia's warning which had sent the husband so quickly home? At all events, here he was, settled in as firmly, as quietly, as though he had never been away at all. Hatherleigh's scarcely born romance died in his breast.

Adney, who had been taking the air in the paddock, in the casual way in which he always hovered about when his master was out, came walking up the broad gravel road some distance behind the party, surveying with satisfaction the group in front. Presently Lance turned back, saw him, and apparently asked his father who that was; for the colonel gave him a shout and he went running forward.

"Here, Adney, here's this lad says he doesn't remember you."

"Oh, Master Lance, and I put you on your first pony, just outside the barracks at Nunapur!"

Lance's face lit up. "Was he called Whiskers?" he cried. "I do remember, then. You brought him every morning. How do you do, Adney, jolly glad to see you."

As they all passed on to the house, where Kirdles was awaiting them, Mrs. Caron fell back and said in a low voice to Adney, "I want a word with you."

"Yes, madam?"

He stopped and looked respectfully yet keenly at her. He knew, of course, that she had bolted and that Mr. Eldrid had fetched her back; though that was not the way he put it to the household staff. To them he said:

"I had it straight from the colonel that Mrs. Caron had promised to take Miss Burton up north, an arrangement that had been made before there was question of his coming back. She went and she returned, and so that's that."

"And what," demanded a sceptical parlour-maid, "has now become of Miss Burton?"

"She's at Grendon Grange, and I hear it's likely that the two young gentlemen and Miss Aster will join her there seeing that the colonel has his hands full, and I hear they like staying at the Grange."

"Like it? That they do," said the cook. "All last summer holidays they were there, and year before that too——"

"Colonel was telling me," pursued Adney, "that Mr. Eldrid has got a couple of ponies there that he keeps for them to ride."

The staff sniffed collectively.

"What's the good of this stuff you're givin' us? We know there's something queer. Husbands and wives sleepin' on different floors—so natural, isn't it?"

Adney was not only not abashed, he actually burst out laughing at this critic. "So nice for 'em to start a honeymoon, wouldn't it be, in this house, as full of people as an egg's full of meat? No! Let the colonel get through all these here banquets and receptions and electioneering, and what not, and then they'll go off together comfortable—see if they don't."

"Something in that, no doubt," said the cook pensively.

"Something? There's everything in it, with anyone like the colonel, that's a real gentleman, not one of these temporaries," returned Adney contemptuously.

Therefore it was with eyes which, though veiled, were extremely observant that he now faced Valery in the garden.

"Adney, Mr. Eldrid was saying something to me about your thinking there might be danger for the colonel from—from assassins?"

"Yes 'm."

"That is serious—real—to be guarded against?"

"Yes 'm. You see, these Hali chaps have got

the Huns behind 'em. There was some Hun Bolshies there when we arrived, selling arms to the natives and getting good and ready to stir up hell in those parts, and the colonel lifted 'em. That's the real truth of the matter, though it was kept out of the papers; and though the chap that was after us never got beyond Modane, still, there's a heap of Hun Bolshies in England, and when they get word, they'll be getting busy, likely as not."

"Have you seen or heard anything suspicious since he got here?"

"Nothing at all, ma'am; and I've kept my eyes skinned. Also Baker, the showfer. He's a good sort. I'm armed, and so's the colonel, all the time."

"I'm not, and it would be of no use if I were, I can't use a revolver. But I have taken one precaution. I've bought a big, shrill whistle, and I have it always on me. If you hear me whistle once, wherever I may be, come to me; but if I whistle twice in succession come double quick. Do you understand? One whistle means 'Be at hand,' two whistles mean 'Come this moment.' "

"Right 'm," said Adney, with a look of new friendliness. "It's a good idea; for the colonel, he's rash, you know, and doesn't understand fear."

"No; and Adney, one thing more. If you see or hear anything, anywhere, that makes you suspicious, let me know without delay, please. I shall be with him all the time, and I shall want to know what to look out for."

CHAPTER XXIV

ELECTIONEERING

LIKE the first great crisis in her life, the second had flashed past on Valery's horizon, leaving her so bruised and defeated that she hardly knew what had happened.

As on the former occasion, she had been taken by the hand of her husband, and moved, as one moves a pawn on the board, into the position where he would have her be.

On her wedding-day, having no use for her, he had removed her and flung her into a drawer to await his further pleasure. He had returned later, found that she could be in some respects convenient, even necessary to his plans, and had forthwith drawn her out once more, and set her in her place, to move as his hand directed.

She had yielded the main point, and now she wondered what had induced her to do so. She was in a state of smouldering rebellion, of dumb resentment, of fell determination—that nothing—nothing!—should shift her from her final refuge; the refuge of her own spiritual independence.

She summoned Kirdles to her aid, with the object of arranging that in no circumstances should she be left *tête-à-tête* with her husband. "You promised

me your help and support, whichever way I might decide," said she, "but it was you who tipped the scale for me—you know it was. You said you thought I should be even more miserable if I refused than I am now. Well, it's hard to believe, but in any case, here I am; and you must keep your promise of help and support. You have got to chaperon me all the time."

"Why? Are you afraid that Colonel Caron will make advances?"

"Yes, if you want to know, I am afraid he will. There are several reasons. The first is that he is British and he thinks I belong to him, and that what is his is his own, to do as he likes with. He would like to be able to feel that his control over me was absolute, whereas now he knows that he has no control over me, that whatever I do, is done because I have made up my own mind to do it. The next reason is that I have turned out a good deal better-looking than he expected, and therefore he would like to be on good terms with me. It would be pleasant. The third reason is his dread of scandal, which may still assail us, you know, in spite of our pious exterior. Servants talk."

"Val, you are very bitter."

"Well, you can't have thought that the course I am now taking was likely to sweeten me, can you? However, in any case, I am the captain of my soul, and I'm not going to take a penny piece from him to spend on clothes. I'll pay for my presentation gown and all these other ridiculous garments (which

I shall never wear again as long as I live) out of the last two hundred of my precious thousand. That will mean that I shan't be able to go back to Oxford, for I'm jolly hard up; but at least I shall not have sold my help and countenance to him!"

"Val, this is sheer folly. If you must have these things in order to do what your husband wishes, he ought to pay for them."

"I'd sooner be indebted to a jungle tiger than to him for anything!" came the violent retort.

As it left Val's lips the colonel entered the room. Nothing in his quiet aspect indicated that he had heard the words.

"I came to tell you that I have just had a note from the Miss La Placis," he said. "They are both down with the 'flu, and will not be able to receive us next Tuesday as planned. However," he held out the note to her, "they hope it is only a pleasure postponed. I shall have to postpone it for a good while I fear; we are becoming inundated with engagements."

Val glanced down the page. "All the better," said she in even tones, as unlike those which he had in fact overheard, as the cooing of a dove is unlike the hoot of a motor-horn. "I shall be able to take the children out primrosing that afternoon."

"I also came," he went on, "to know whether you would like to go up to town to-day, as I have to, and have ordered the car immediately after lunch?"

"Yes, please let me come too; I have to be fitted

with frocks and buy hats and shoes and all kinds of things."

His face brightened. "Quarter to two too early for you?"

"Will it be too early for us, Kirdles?" asked Val, fully aware of the way in which his face fell.

Kirdles agreed to the time, and Val went out of the room.

Carfrae waited until she was out of earshot, and then said in dropped tones, "I suppose she was referring to me just now?"

Kirdles could not deny it. "You must forgive her. She is very miserable," she murmured awkwardly.

After a long silence: "I learned patience in the desert," said he calmly; and went away with no more words.

Valery constantly manœuvred that there should be a third in the car when they drove. But she could not always manage it. Now and again they would set out for some function, the colonel in full dress uniform, looking like a picture of the typical British soldier-aristocrat and herself as well turned out as any woman they were likely to meet. On these occasions, as soon as they were seated side by side, she would ask him for information on some point of etiquette, or more usually upon his own African experiences, a subject of which she never seemed to weary and upon which she soon became expert to a degree which astonished him.

Her political acumen was also a surprise. She

collected data for him, made notes for speeches. She was indefatigable in working for him; but to play with him she steadfastly declined.

He would look out of the window at the tennis going forward on the gravel court, which Lyndsay had caused to be made, at his own expense, the previous year. Aster and Lyndsay against Val and Lance made up an even four, and they fought their matches hard, though always, as Carfrahc thankfully noted, without wrangling. If he himself asked for a game, he was warmly welcomed, but Valery always regretted that there were notes she must write, frocks she must try on, calls she must pay: and so, on one pretext or another, left him to the others.

One night the young people had invited four or five friends of their own age, and were up in the schoolroom playing that fierce and wonderful card game which to them was known as "Crash Demon"—the game in which everybody has a separate pack of cards, and builds upon everyone else's aces. The fun was fast and furious, and Caron coming in to look on was begged to sit down.

"Take my place," said Valery, rising. "I promised Kirdles to go and help her arrange a menu for to-morrow's lunch to the constituency."

"Then," passionately burst out Lance, who was much excited, "if you go, I shan't play any more! Val, you wretched *quitter*."

The smack on the head which his father instantly bestowed was as surprising as it was painful.

Wild at being unable to restrain his tears, the

boy cried out to know what he had done to deserve a thick ear; and as usual when over-wrought or in any distress, flung himself into the shelter of Val's arms, while she most ungratefully looked at Carfrae with resentment and reproach in her eyes.

"Get out of it, Lance," said Caron, feeling so enraged that he himself was surprised at it, "molly-coddle! Taking refuge among the petticoats! Apologise to Val for what you called her, sir!"

"If a chap can't call his own sister a qu-quitter," gasped the boy. "She didn't mind, did you, Val?"

"Well, I can't say I liked it," she replied dryly, "and if your father orders you to apologise, you'd better tell me you're sorry."

"You know I'm sorry, old thing," was the answer of the ill-judging Lance, flinging himself once more upon her. They exchanged a hearty kiss, during which the colonel's fingers tingled to repeat the punishment he had lately administered.

However, Val left the room and he sat down to play. Encountering her later that evening, when she came to give him a *précis* of a speech in the House which he wanted, he said apologetically, "I beg your pardon, Val, for losing my temper this evening; but I should be obliged if you'd caress Lance as little as you can. It isn't good for him."

Valery looked at him with rising colour. Her chest heaved.

"Poor little chap, he has no mother," she said in a low voice.

The simple answer shook him so badly that for a

moment he had nothing to say; and Valery after a slight hesitation went out of the room, leaving him to the realisation that his remark had been prompted by nothing in the world but a savage, helpless jealousy.

It seemed that the holidays were soon over. The children rebelled against going to the Grange without Valery, even with the bribe of Madge Burton's being there. They were perfectly content at home, and keenly though Carfrah sought an occasion to complain that Valery neglected him for them, she never gave him one. She had stipulated for leisure to use in her own way, and the way she chose was to pass it in the companionship of the children and Lyn, who always made one of the party. The colonel could make no objection.

The youngsters, to Miss Kirby's untold relief, never commented upon the state of affairs between Valery and their father, having the blessed faculty that children, in spite of introspective novels, almost always have, of taking the existing state of things for granted. The colonel had never lived at home since his second marriage, and had Valery changed her sleeping accommodation, it might have excited more remark than did her going on in the usual way. Valery was conscious now and then of its not having escaped Aster's attention; but Aster, in her first year at a public school, was in the throes of sharp reaction from precocious sex-tendency. She was immersed in hockey, cricket, the swimming bath and the "gym," and scorned sentiment in the most

approved fashion. She wore her hair almost as short as a boy's, raced about in knickers as often as skirts, and cultivated a hoydenism destined to make way in a year or so for further developments.

If Valery had feared that the end of the holidays might make her isolated position more difficult, she found nothing to support these forebodings.

Except for that one brief outbreak about Lance, Caron's manner to her was undeviatingly cold, considerate and gentle. He deferred to her wishes in everything, and never transgressed her stipulation concerning any mention of the past.

By degrees she grew less nervous of being alone with him, less ready to take flight when he appeared. By the time he had been home six weeks, each knew what to expect from the other, and the agreement worked with a smoothness which Miss Kirby had been far from anticipating.

Caron's own nerves and those of Adney also were recovering tone, for nothing of any kind had been seen or heard since their arrival at Archwood to suggest the presence of any undesirable in the neighbourhood.

The fêting of the hero went on, and his election meetings became more numerous. Valery stood the long hours and the constantly recurring fatigue with all the force of her splendid, healthy youth. Kirdles thought that she grew every day more beautiful. Her face, with all its locked-up significance, its withheld emotions, its disciplined control, fascinated people without their knowing why. The

constituency went mad over her, the local paper exhausted itself in descriptions of her wonderful toilettes, her grand manner, her vivid speaking.

It was a proud day for Adney, when he was first able to reply, "Yes, my lady," to an order given him by the wife of Sir Carfrah Caron. There was no bitterness in his heart now where she was concerned. He did not know the secret of the cleavage which existed between the two; but he felt sure that it could not be permanent. He looked forward with longing to the end of the summer, when the hard work should be over, the baronet safely in Parliament, and the two set free to go upon what he had determined should be their honeymoon.

It so happened that Carfrah had never heard his wife make a speech. He was always so busy that when she was at one place he must perforce go himself in another direction. It was waste of power for them both to address the same meeting.

One day, however, it chanced that there was a large afternoon meeting at Lufton, one of his opponent's strongholds; and they were both booked to be present, though only he was to speak. He was coming on from another meeting and her ladyship arrived in the County Hall before him. The chairman was in a difficulty. He was himself no speaker, and could not volunteer to spin out the time until the arrival of the colonel—and the magnate upon whom he had relied to do this for him had been taken ill and had just rung up to say he was unable to come. In these circumstances those on the plat-

form earnestly besought Lady Caron herself to give them a few words, and Val, though she had nothing prepared, found herself facing a huge and somewhat restive gathering, annoyed because they were beginning late. The chairman made matters no better by the fact that he was nervous before what he looked upon as signs that the meeting intended to be rowdy. He hummed and hawed, and there were a good many interruptions and some ribald comment. He was very red in the face when he sat down, and the eyes he turned to Val were imploring. "I oughtn't to ask a lady to stand up to such a lot," he said unhappily, "but what can we do?"

"We'll see what we can do," replied her ladyship with a smile. She stood up forthwith, and the sight of her was so pleasing to the eye that there was a round of applause to start off with.

"Your chairman," said she, "thinks that you have come here this afternoon to speak your minds. I hope you have. I want to help you to make up your minds, and then all you've got to do is to tell us what you've decided. You are men—Martershire men—I hardly think I need ask you to give me a fair hearing."—(Cries of "We'll listen to you, missie!")—"Yes, I want you to listen to me because this is not going to be an electioneering speech. My husband will be here the moment he can get away from the meeting he is now addressing, and he'll tell you himself what principles he's out for, much better than I can. I'm going to fill in a few moments till he comes, by telling you the kind of

man we are asking you to vote for. Carfrae Caron was born in this constituency, and so were his father and his father's father, back for many generations. Martershire is in his blood, and in his bones. He's one of yourselves, nourished like you from the soil of this dear old county. Do you remember what Shakespeare said about the mettle of a man's pasture? He meant the qualities that are in a man's blood as a result of the meat and drink that have nourished him. Martershire pastures raised the corn and the cattle that went to the making of Carfrae Caron. And when he was a man, how did he show the mettle of his pasture? By leaving all that made life comfortable, and the home of his ancestors, and going forth, at the order of his Government, to make a great discovery. He led a band of Englishmen into the heart of an untried desert. He bore their hardships, took their risks, was one of them while he shouldered the responsibility for their lives and their freedom. When things looked blackest, he not only kept up their courage, but he himself devised a way out of such difficulties as looked insurmountable. Let me tell you, for the next five minutes, how he extricated himself and his men from an almost hopeless situation."

She related the story of the eclipse and the use made of it by Caron, to a breathlessly attentive audience. When the rolling shouts and applause died down she was still on her feet, and evidently wanted to say a last word. She was smiling with a touch of mischief.

"I've told you not only what Sir Carfrae *can* do, but what he actually *did* do. His men trusted him, and he saw them through. Is it likely—is it possible—that his own brothers, the men of Martershire, won't trust him? Electors of Lufton, my advice to you is this: *Put your last shirt on Carfrae Caron!*"

That brought down the house; for Lufton's main industry is shirt-making. Val took her seat in a tempest of approval which seemed to her as if it would never subside. Those words were destined to be the rallying cry for the election, and the room rang with them. Then, when the tumult began to die down, it suddenly rose once more to the pitch of enthusiasm; and, glancing round, she saw that her husband had just quietly taken the seat upon the other side of the chairman.

CHAPTER XXV

AN UNFORESEEN OUTBREAK

SIR CARFRAE seemed in no hurry to quell the demonstrative welcome. He looked oddly pale, and it seemed to the solicitous chairman that he was not quite ready to speak. However, when at last, very deliberately, he laid down his notes, put his hands behind him with a gesture which was characteristic, and began, his voice was well under control.

"Men of Martershire—brothers of the soil—my wife has told you, better than I could do if I took a week over it—what it means to men to have between them such a bond as that which exists between you and me to-day. But she has not told you, for she could not know, what is felt by a wanderer like myself upon his return. Six months ago I was lying in an African hospital, and nothing to me seemed less likely than that I should live to see another English June. When a man lies—as I have lain—upon what he believes to be his death-bed, he is apt to sort out in his mind the things that really matter from those that are less important. In that exile and solitude I thought a great deal about England, and about this particular bit of England which to me is summed up in the

one magic name of Home; and I determined that, if I should be spared to set foot once again in my native county, I would do my level best to work for it, to stand by it and to help it by any means in my power. Let me tell you now how, if you do me the honour to elect me, I propose to set about it."

After that beginning you might, as the agents afterwards remarked, have heard a pin drop until the candidate had finished speaking; and the shouts rose mightily when at last he took his seat, after an address closely reasoned, well put together, and full of that personal knowledge of his hearers and their needs which is always respected by the native.

"We'll send you to Westminster, right enough!" they told him; and later, as he was leaving the platform, after some brisk heckling, they broke from their seats and surged all about him. Then, as he handed down Valery there was another call of "Three more for her ladyship!" and she turned to nod and smile at them, and further, to their delight, to kiss her hand in response to their assurances that they were "putting their shirts on Sir Car-frae."

"Do let us drive you back, Mr. Dickson," said Lady Caron cordially, leaning forward in the car, as the agent who had organised the meeting seemed inclined to shut them in and himself remain outside.

"Afraid I can't get away, not yet awhile, your ladyship," he replied, "thanking you all the same.

Great speech indeed—great speech! You'll allow me to congratulate you! One of the best meetings we've had."

They were driving off alone together—the thing she dreaded. She knew—felt in every pulsing nerve, that the man beside her was in a state of such tension that the least false move might precipitate—what? What was it that she feared? She could not have said, only she knew that she was afraid; so much so that her usual resolute supply of safe small talk had failed her completely.

Caron sat forward, his head turned quite away from her, gazing out of the window, and returning the vociferous salutations of the crowd as they slowly drew clear of the town.

Valery saw that they would soon be out in the open country—no longer observed—and a desperate need beset her to do something to fend off the moment she saw approaching. At last he turned, faced her, and showed to her a face unlike anything she had known before in him. The hardness was all gone. The eyes were full of light—each handsome feature seemed to be, for the first time in their mutual acquaintance, given its due value by a new inner harmony which subtly altered all.

"So," he said, and even his voice had changed, "so, at last you break silence—at last I have heard you speak——"

The extremity of her need gave Valery an idea—inspired her with the safe and trivial topic that she craved. "Oh, don't you think this car is insuffer-

ably hot? What could have induced Baker to shut it up?" she cried, flinging back her wrap. "Please, Carfrae, stop him and tell Adney to get down and open the top."

He looked amazed, cruelly taken aback. "Hot? Are you too hot?" he repeated, almost vacantly. He passed his hand over his forehead. "It was drizzling, I think—that's why they closed it——"

"Oh, was it? But it's quite fine now, and I feel perfectly stifled. That hall was so close. Please let me have some air."

For a moment he made no answer. Then, with a start, he leaned forward and gave the order she desired. They came to a halt, Adney got down and rapidly threw open the car, letting in the rather watery sunshine.

"It don't look very settled, my lady," he remarked.

"Oh, it won't rain before we get home," she returned optimistically.

This matter adjusted, they continued their progress.

Carfrae had leaned back as if absorbed in thought, his eyes seemed to be gazing out into distance unprobed. Valery, breathing more freely now that they were no longer in any sense of the word private, sat up and looked relieved. Presently she heard his voice, low and unlike his usual tones:

"What made you speak of me as you did? I heard—almost all."

"What made me do it?" she asked stiffly. "I

was merely observing my half of our bargain. I undertook to help you by any means in my power; did I not?"

It seemed to her as if the radiance died out of his face, which set back into its usual lines. "Is that all?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Only you spell your 'don't' with a 'w.'"

"Sometimes it is better spelt that way," she replied dryly. "But do let me tell you how well I thought you took up your hecklers. There were some there who hoped to make serious trouble, but you were ready for them."

He made an odd sound. "I felt equal to anything at that moment—I had the strength of half a dozen," he said. "But now—this evening, at Smethling—I shall be like a pricked bubble."

"Oh, you mustn't give way like that. Remember, it will be all over next week. You've simply got to keep going until then. Say to yourself that it's got to be done!"

"What does it matter? I don't want to be in Parliament," he muttered.

"You are overtired. We ought to have stopped in the town and got you some tea. Surely General Beaton gave you a good lunch?"

"Lunch? Oh, yes, yes, of course. I had plenty of lunch. I don't want anything at all . . . except what I can't have."

"Most people are like that, I think," replied Valery coldly. "Who is that man, I wonder? Is

he one of your future constituents? He evidently wants a good look at you!"

As she spoke the car slipped past a man who was walking at the roadside as if on his way from the meeting, and who, on hearing the horn, had stopped, turned, and stared hard at them as they drove by.

Caron saluted involuntarily as his eye met that of the wayfarer, who raised his hat with a half smile. He was well though quietly dressed, and looked like one who dwells in the country and goes up to town every day.

When he had been left some way behind Caron leaned forward and spoke to Adney: "Did you note that fellow?"

"Yes, Sir Carfrae. I've just been asking Baker if he knows him by sight. He says he's quite a stranger to him."

"Thought I'd seen him before somewhere," said Caron in a puzzled voice.

"I think I'll get off in Marterstead and go and describe him to the police as near as I can. He was on foot—he won't get far."

"Oh, I don't think you need worry to do that."

"Better do it, Sir Carfrae, by your leave."

"Be on the safe side," said Valery hurriedly.

"Oh, why?" he asked in a voice whose icy sneer could hardly belong to the man who a minute ago had said: "*At last I have heard you speak!*"

"Why? Because we are out to win this election," she returned at once, "and nobody is going to stop us."

When they reached home she said to the maid who came to the door that she was very tired and would have tea taken up to her own sitting-room, whither she at once repaired.

She felt that the thin ice had been skated over, the danger point passed for the moment; but she wished for no further opportunities. It was the first time that Carfrae had even allowed her to see that it was not easy for him to hold to the conditions she had imposed. She felt angry, but fairly sure that upon reflection he would realise that he had made a mistake.

She went into her bedroom, rang for her maid, and changed into a rest-gown, by which time her tea was awaiting her.

Slowly she emerged from the inner room, closed the communicating door, and went to the deep, well-cushioned couch which stood near the window of her study. The room faced south, and the sun streamed in through the western side of the Georgian bow window. Outside lay the gardens in their early summer beauty. Spring had been tardy, and the season had come to perfection with a rush, so that crimson hawthorn, golden laburnum and the exquisite faint purple and white of the lilac were mingled; while farther off, beyond the garden, the smother of the apple blossom in the orchard supplied a kind of bridal hilarity. The rain feared by Adney had rolled away in a purple mass of cloud, leaving all the world aglitter. Blackbirds and

thrushes supplied minstrelsy to the banquet of beauty.

The big business-like writing table was piled high with election correspondence and political pamphlets. Lyndsay and Val between them performed for the candidate all the work of a private secretary, and did it very well. Various neatly typed letters, duly signed by Caron, were lying upon the blotting-pad awaiting dispatch.

But first, after her exertions, her ladyship needed some tea. Here in this room she was safe from intrusion, and she snuggled down among her cushions, feet curled under her, trying to soothe her disturbed spirits by gazing upon the tender beauty of the sunset world.

Kirdles would be upstairs shortly. She had not been able—most unfortunately—to get away that afternoon to the meeting. She had not known that Valery was likely to speak, any more than Val herself had foreseen it. She would be very eager to hear all that had taken place, and would be certain to hurry to her child as soon as she had poured out tea for Carfrae and Lyndsay in the drawing-room.

Having quenched her thirst and enjoyed her savoury sandwiches, Val laid down her cheek upon the satin cushion, and awaited her in a queer blend of physical luxury and spiritual restlessness.

“Come in, old thing,” she muttered drowsily as the tiny brass knocker on the sacred door was tapped. Lazily she half turned, so that she could

extend both arms. "Come and be hugged, old darling. Where have you been this age?"

The dead silence that ensued caused her to sit suddenly bolt upright. Across the tea-table stood Carfrae, and he was gazing upon her in a silence so eloquent as to be almost terrifying. In one second she had changed from the loving, unaffected girl to the hard, cynical woman.

Instantly her feet were on the floor, her draperies straightened, her figure drawn up. She was on the brink of an angry inquiry as to what right he had to intrude upon a privacy he had promised to respect; but as the words leapt to her lips she rejected them. It was undignified to be angry; perhaps a little ridiculous, too. After all, this *was* a sitting-room, and he *had* knocked before entering.

As he evidently left it to her to sound the opening note, she presently asked stiffly: "Do you want anything?"

"I am sorry I have evidently disturbed you. I came up because Kirby has visitors down there, and I have just received this note, which should by rights have been addressed to you."

She rose, took a note from his hand, and made a slight gesture.

"Please sit down."

"You permit?" His face was grave, but his voice had an edge of sarcasm.

She paid no attention to that, but took the note from the envelope and read. It was from the Miss La Placis, and it said that they were proposing to

leave the Dairy Lodge for a month's stay in two days' time. They felt very sad because, owing to Sir Carfrae's numerous engagements, they had not had the pleasure of seeing him; but they begged to know if he could possibly bring Lady Caron and come to tea the following afternoon? If he could only spare them one little hour it would be something.

Valery glanced up from her reading. Carfrae had not accepted her none too cordial an invitation to be seated. He was standing in the window, gazing down upon the lawn.

"Well," said she, "can you do as they ask?"

"Not tea, certainly. I have a meeting at Redford. But if you agree, we might stroll down their way about six and pay our respects just for a few minutes. The six o'clock meeting to-morrow at Manners Green is off." After a just perceptible pause he added: "This is all so familiar to me. This was my nursery when I was a kid."

"So I think I have heard. The room was not in use when I came. That was why I chose it. Is that all you came to say?"

He turned from the window and looked steadily at her. Her long straight gown of mist-grey satin was looped on the left hip with a big silver clasp. She wore a string of uncut turquoise beads that hung below her waist. Against the background of the white enamel of the window panelling she showed with somewhat the effect of an oil-painting. Her splendid youth and vitality, the warm tints of her

complexion and the glinting brown of her hair seemed to tell out against the neutral tones, vivid and glowing. Her proportions, always rather Juno-esque than nymph-like, were now almost perfect, though in the last three months she had grown thinner than she was when he first came home. As his eyes rested on her the words of Othello floated to his mind:

“One whose hand,
Like the base Indians, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe.”

Could this wintry queen be the same creature as the coaxing child who a minute ago was curled up like a dormouse among her cushions, and who had invited her visitor to “come and be hugged”?

“No,” he said, speaking with a nervousness which he could not hide, “it is not all. I have something else to say. I came also to—er—to ask you to waive for a few minutes one article of our unwritten agreement. It was stipulated that the past should not be referred to between us, except by mutual consent. I ask you to let me refer to it for—er—perhaps ten minutes?”

“It is better for me to refuse,” she replied stonily. “No good object can be served by discussing it; and just now you need all your attention—all your energies—for your political work.”

He paused. “You refuse, then?”

“I must refuse.”

“Good. I will speak, then,” he went on undaunted, “not of the past, but of the future. You

laid no embargo upon that. I wish to know—are there any conditions—any circumstances—in which you would be willing—might possibly be willing—to reconsider your determination to repudiate your marriage vows?"

Her voice as she replied was level and quiet: "There are no circumstances that I know of, and no conditions that I can foresee, which could make me change my mind."

"Am I permitted to ask you to give your reasons?"

"I think you know them very well; and this talk is worse than useless. . . ." She bit her lip to hold back tears. "Is it fair?" cried she, more impetuously. "Am I not already doing enough for you? No, I am not going to throw it in your teeth, but I do ask you to have some consideration for me! Though you have no idea what it is costing me to be here, you surely must perceive *something* of the difficulty of my position. Don't drive me into a corner."

He made a movement as though he would have approached her, then turned and moved away through the room, hands behind him; flinging a look at the books, the mezzotints, the few bits of pottery, the flowers, the girlish collection of college groups.

"How pretty you have made it!" he said, more to himself than to her.

She took the chance of his attention being elsewhere to apply her handkerchief to eyes that were

perilously full. "I am glad you think so. And now, if you have said what you wished to say, will you go away? I have work to do before I can dress for dinner."

He came to a standstill in the centre of the room. "Oh, but I haven't nearly said what I came to say. The questions I have put to you so far have been to clear the ground. Let us be definite as to the point that we have reached, because it's important. You and I have been in the house together now for three months. I have kept our pact during all that time. This afternoon—listening to you, hearing what you said—there dawned in me a dim sort of hope that you had perhaps begun to see more clearly, were entering into my side of the question, would be willing, not only to be a figure-head, but to let me talk to you, to try to know me a bit better. . . . You tell me that that is not so? Your attitude now is just what it was when you first came back from Grendon?"

She said: "It is the same. *I have not changed.*"

"And there is, humanly speaking, no hope of your changing?"

He spoke sharply, eagerly, making a stride in her direction.

"As far as I can tell, there is no hope of my changing."

He waited, as if to give her a chance to say more. As she did not speak, "That is—your—last word?" he slowly demanded. She was very pale, but she signed assent.

"Very well. That being so, I will proceed to say what I came to say, but would not utter until you had cut away all hope from me. I hereby dissolve our pact—the temporary pact we made. You must go. It is all over. From to-day we separate. You go your way, I go mine. Be anywhere you choose, but not in my house. I cannot have you here."

His totally unexpected words whipped the colour into her face as a slap might have done. She literally gasped with the surprise of them.

"Are you mad? You can't realise what you are saying."

"I know only too well. I'm confessing failure. I thought I could go through with this preposterous scheme, and I find I can't. That's all. It must end."

Val's blazing indignation drove nervousness from her mind. She spoke very quietly because she was at white heat.

"So you think you can play this trick on me a third time? Let me inform you that you cannot, for I will not consent. You took me once, used me to satisfy your grudge against my mother, and flung me away like yesterday's newspaper. You came back when you chose, annexed me once more, and actually persuaded me into serving your purpose a second time! But that was the last. Do you understand? You shall not do it again. You have entered into this arrangement, and you must hold to it until I choose to release you from the bargain. Oh!"—momentarily the flames shot high—"I should think no self-respecting Englishwoman of the

twentieth century was ever treated as you treat me! But there's a limit, and beyond it you shall not go."

"Valery, you don't understand; let me explain."

"Can you assert," she pursued, "that I haven't kept my word? Have I come short of what I promised?"

"No, no. It's I, not you, who have come short. I undertook what I'm not strong enough to see through. I set out to live in the same house with you, without making any effort to change the terms on which we stand, and I find I can't do it. I thought it only honest to tell you this; but it seems you persistently misunderstand me. . . ." He seemed to choke down feeling, and went on: "God forbid that I should do anything that seems like treating you badly. If that's the way you take it, why, then, the farce must go on. But the thing's obsessing me. I'm losing my mental perspective. I can see nothing clearly because you dazzle my eyes."

"That's simply nonsense. You have only to make up your mind not to think about me. Surely you have enough matters of importance upon your shoulders, at least for the next week or so, to prevent your brooding over a matter of sentiment?"

He made no reply. With shoulders hunched and arms folded, he was gazing out moodily over the garden. Val's anger died. He looked so brow-beaten that she felt she must have succeeded in impressing upon him the hopelessness of his advance.

"Come, Carfrae," said she, rather like a school-mistress forgiving a froward pupil, "pull yourself

together. You're a bit run down this afternoon, and you made things worse by coming in here, where you have no right to be. Let's forget it. Make up your mind that whatever happens we are going through with this election. As soon as you are safely returned we can separate as speedily as you choose. But the one thing you must not—shall not—do is to let down Lyndsay and me at this crisis."

He unfolded his arms and turned to face her. There was not a yard between them as they stood. "And suppose I own," he muttered slowly, "that I won't be answerable for myself, that I feel I might lose my head—and——"

She gave a little laugh, almost snapping her fingers, as she turned scornfully away from him and went to the writing-table.

"Make yourself quite easy on that score. There's not an ounce of sentiment in me from head to heel, and I assure you that I am perfectly able to take care of myself."

She gathered up the loose letters and turned to the door. "I have run short of envelopes, and I am going to find Lyn and ask him for some more," said she calmly, "so you'll excuse me. Don't come here again, please."

As she reached the door it was opened from without by Miss Kirby, who was entering hurriedly, and could not control a start when she saw the colonel. "Oh! are you busy, Val?" She turned to go, but Val, smiling, held her by the arm while Carfrael walked slowly out, feeling within him such a clash

of rage, mortification, passion and hurt pride as he had never thought to experience at the hands of any woman.

"My dear," said Kirdles when he had gone, "I thought he never came up here."

"This is the first time, and I think it will be the last," said Val flippantly. "What do you think he came for? To give me notice!"

"What are you talking about—*notice*?"

"Notice to quit. Yes. He said he had had enough of it, and he was going to chuck his election and everything, if only he could get me out of the house."

"*Val!* What did you say?"

"I told him there was nothing doing. He brought me here, and here I shall stay until after this election. Then I'll be off as soon and as far as he likes. But he isn't going to let us down at this stage of the proceedings." She surveyed the staring, bewildered Kirdles with a wicked twinkle in her eyes. "Do you know, old thing, I am really beginning to enjoy myself!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DAY AFTER

OPEN house was kept at Archwood during these hectic weeks, for people dropped in from all over the country to every kind of meal—agents, delegates, squires of small villages eager to arrange meetings, enthusiastic ladies with *questionnaires* (blessed word), and a sprinkling of personal friends who were organising the canvassing.

Valery, in radiant summer frocks, had to preside over very motley luncheon tables, and on the day after the Lufton meeting they sat down a party of fifteen. Sir George Bowyer had come because he really couldn't keep away, so delighted was he with Lady Caron and so anxious that she should know something of the sensation caused by her speech in the big town full of factories and celebrated for its disorderly meetings. Hugh Hatherleigh was there by invitation, having come to help Lyndsay with various jobs.

Val was paid so many compliments that at last Carfrae looked up from what he was saying at the other end of the long table and called out:

"Bowyer, enough said. You are turning my wife's head."

"Ha, ha! Not very easy to do that, Caron; she has the most level head of any woman I've met!"

Seriously, old chap, I hope you realise that if you get in it'll be largely because she's boosted you in with that silver tongue of hers."

"Yes, yes, you are free to talk to her in that style, because you haven't got to manage her after the election's over. When her head's completely turned, what am I going to do with her?"

"Turn me out to grass," said Val impertinently. "I shall want a good holiday, and so will you."

"Lucky man!" cried Sir George. "Where shall you take him, Lady Caron?"

"Oh, he won't want the task of keeping me in order. As he says, I shall be a bit difficult to handle after all your injudicious flattery! A little solitude will cool me down a bit."

"*Solitude à deux—eh?*" cried Sir George, laughing delightedly. "I see, you're going away where nobody can find you; that's the idea?"

Caron's voice again sounded clearly down the table: "Some unsuspected isle in the far seas," he quoted.

"Doesn't that sound attractive this weather to your ladyship?" teased Sir George.

"Domesticity is never attractive to me, Sir George. I belong to my own day and generation. I've never been really broken to double harness, so it's fortunate that my husband is so little at home, isn't it?" said the girl, with a mischief in eye and voice which quite reassured her old friend as to the fact that she was not speaking seriously.

"Well," he said, "folks have much to say in

praise of modern marriage under the new conditions; but somehow I don't think it wears as well as the old kind——”

“In which the woman's affection was blind, like a dog's, so that she would trot meekly after her man, however poor a sort he was, admiring him and hanging upon his pleasure——”

“Just because he was her man,” returned Sir George. “Ah, yes, my dear young lady, say what you like, that is the kind of affection all we poor fellows stand in need of. We have a nervous suspicion that unless our wives loved us blindly they probably wouldn't love us at all. An admiring wife is often the sole buttress of a mediocre man's self-esteem. Without it he would never get anywhere.”

The discussion had to be broken off short, because the inexorable clock pointed to a quarter past two, and the car was throbbing in the drive, ready to carry off the gentlemen to the next meeting.

“You're coming, too, Lady Caron?” cried various voices.

“No, I've got an afternoon off to-day,” she replied, “and I'm going to sit in the garden and laze for a couple of hours.”

Carfrae came round the table to her. “I shall be back by five,” said he, and as he spoke he laid his hand very deliberately and very firmly on her shoulder. She could not shake it off in front of everybody. “Keep a cup of tea for me,” he bade her, “and afterwards I think you promised to stroll down the park to call on our tenants, did you not?”

"Did I? Oh, well, perhaps I may, if it isn't too hot," she replied, not looking at him. And slipping free from his touch, she ran to shake hands with the various departing guests.

She just got the chance of a whisper aside to Adney before the cars went off, to inquire whether the man they saw the previous day had been identified. Adney smiled reassuringly.

"Oh, yes, that wasn't anything at all," said he. "Nothing, only the way he looked at us made me notice him. We're safe enough, ma'am. Don't you worry. Not so easy as what they thought it was, to trail about after a man like him over here in England."

Val laughed, much relieved, and went off to give orders that tea was not to be served till five; also to warn Kirdles to be on hand.

"I had just begun to think that the chaperoning was superfluous," she remarked grimly, "but I find I was mistaken. You sit tight, old thing, and see he doesn't leave the rails."

"Until yesterday he has behaved beautifully, Val." There was implied reproach in the tones.

"Oh, of course, you are going over to his side. To a woman your age no man as handsome as Carfrae could ever be wrong."

"Oh, Val, how can you?"

Val laughed teasingly and settled herself in the hammock. The hush of afternoon was over all things, and she gave herself up to the delicious languor of indolence with a book.

It was about a quarter to five when she looked up to see Caron striding towards her across the lawn. He was too soon. Kirdles, base traitor, had not come on duty!

He looked somehow different from yesterday, as though his mood had changed completely. His eyes met hers no longer with an appeal, but with something more like a challenge.

"You look comfy." He flung himself down in a deck-chair and passed a handkerchief over his brow.

"I hope you've forgiven and forgotten my outbreak yesterday," said he lightly. "One gets a bit overstrained with all this rushing about and talking. It shan't occur again. I've had a tophole meeting this afternoon. Lady Sandcastle was there. What a pretty woman! And can't she give the glad eye!" He smiled in appreciative reminiscence. "They are going off after Ascot to Norway. I rather think I shall go with them. Scandinavia sounds good to me after the Sahara."

"Excellent scheme," said Val, showing no surprise, though it is certain that she felt some. She slipped out of the hammock and poured tea for him, he chatting lightly the while of Lady Sandcastle and her toy Poms and her new car and so on.

"She's taking me all round their district tomorrow, canvassing. Ought to make an impression, oughtn't it?"

Kirdles appeared in a few minutes' time, and ousted Val from the tea-tray. "Eat your own tea,

child, for you haven't much time if you are going down to Dairy Lodge first," said she.

"Why, what's Val doing this evening?" Carfrael wanted to know.

"They rang up from Great Lanefield to ask if she could possibly motor over there for a small meeting in the vicarage at seven o'clock."

"Did they? When? They wrote this morning to say the thing couldn't be arranged."

"Well, they seem to have read about yesterday's meeting in the papers, and they called me this afternoon, since you left," replied Val. "I said I'd go. Never miss a chance."

"You are a brick," commented her husband gratefully.

"But since you promised the old ladies to go down for a few minutes, you had better keep your word," advised Kirdles. "Don't forget to thank them, Sir Carfrael, for all they have done. They have canvassed patiently, day after day, in their tiny pony-trap."

"Yes," laughed Val. "I shall never forget their offence when I innocently asked them if they were naturalised. They were both born in England, they tell me. Odd that they still speak the language so imperfectly."

She picked up and carelessly pulled on a hat which Caron thought one of the most provocative things he had ever seen. She knelt before Kirdles to have it set straight. "There you are! Don't stay too long," said the good woman fondly. "I am going

with you to Great Lanefield, and I'll be ready and waiting at twenty minutes to seven."

"Very good. Won't take more than fifteen minutes at the outside to get there. Come along, Carfrae," said Val with would-be nonchalance, taking up gloves and a sunshade, neither of which she intended to use.

Carfrae rose and came to her side, and as they walked off he began a humorous anecdote about a heckler at his late meeting. As they passed out of sight of Kirdles the girl was suddenly and furiously aware that her heart was beating in great heavy strokes, for no reason at all except that he and she were walking through the summer evening together.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SECRET ROOM

DURING the brief walk through the paddock Caron maintained, apparently without effort, the detached and buoyant manner which he had acquired since the previous day. He made it clear that, whichever way the election went, he meant to go away as soon as practicable for a holiday, during which his wife would be "off duty" and might amuse herself as she pleased. For the first time in the whole of their acquaintance he was exerting himself to make friends, and doing his utmost to talk and behave as though no gulf yawned between them.

Determined though she was to permit no friendship, and try as she might to harden her heart, Valery was both touched and impressed by the way in which he had accepted her rebuff, and his evident resolve to do all he could to make her forget his lapse of the previous day.

She was as responsive as she could contrive to be without changing her whole attitude.

The little parlour at Dairy Lodge was sweet with roses, and the old ladies extended to their visitors that courtly welcome which always made it seem as if they conferred a favour upon all who came. They had a great deal to say, and many inquiries to make

concerning the election and their own hopes of having contributed, however slightly, to a satisfactory result.

With their confidential maid, an elderly Spanish woman called Caterina, in attendance, they escorted their landlord over the cottage and displayed to him the various labour-saving devices by means of which they had been made so comfortable. Everything was in the neatest order, upstairs and down.

"Well," said Caron, as they returned to the sitting-room with its huge fireplace, "now I have seen everything but the secret chamber."

This remark set the two old ladies lamenting in chorus. They had been promising themselves such pleasure in displaying it, and to their vexation they had mislaid the key.

"Everywhere ve seek but cannot find; and ve leave dis very evening for London on our vay to Brighton, so that ve have no more chance for long time to show off our celebrated secret room."

"I never knew there was a key," said Valery. "I thought the thing fastened with a catch."

"So it do. Ve nevaire lock it ourselves. But a fool of a builder's man, 'e go in to see if dere was a hole in de roof. 'E say 'e put de key on de table, but nobody 'ave seen it."

Caron, who was by no means consumed with anxiety to inspect the hidey-hole, cut short the profuse apologies by looking at his watch, mentioning his wife's appointment, and taking leave forthwith, courteously but with dispatch.

Val noticed his alacrity with inner discomfort. She told herself that she by no means shared his evident desire for a longer *tête-à-tête*.

As they emerged from the garden gate and found themselves once more in the paddock, his expression denoted keen satisfaction.

"No need for haste, Val. We've got off sooner than I feared would be possible."

"Yes, but I wish you had seen that carving. I think it must have been done by some fugitive who was once hiding there. What a county for history Martershire is, isn't it?"

"Think it's an interesting county?"

"Certainly."

"Almost a pity to be leaving it, isn't it?"

"Some things are matters of necessity, not choice," she murmured, going on rapidly to a different theme. "What odd creatures those old La Placis are! There was hardly a trace of human occupation in that house from top to bottom."

"Well, they are just setting out on a journey, you know, and leaving it for a month or two. Besides, I don't suppose they ever do very much to clutter the place up—a little fancy work, or a game of cribbage. Hallo! Someone calling?"

They faced about and descried the stout Caterina pursuing them, her face crimson with exertion, but wreathed in smiles as she held aloft a key.

As soon as she was within hearing distance she panted out the news that the elder Miss La Placi, on her way back from seeing them off, was crossing

the lawn to the sitting-room window when she set her foot upon something in the grass; and there, behold! was the missing key, which must have been shaken out of the table-cover upon the lawn!

They would not on any account make her ladyship late for her appointment, but would Sir Carfrae be so very kind as to step back for a couple of minutes, just to please the ladies. He would catch up her ladyship before she reached the house.

Caron, in the candidate's frame of mind, in which you always do as you are asked, however little you may wish to do it, assented. "I won't be a minute, Val—don't wait for me—go right on," he said; and walked reluctantly off, the elderly Caterina trotting at his side, beaming and grateful.

Val stood a minute to watch them go, then, facing about once more, she strolled slowly along homewards, trying to force her mind to the consideration of what should be the main points of the speech she was about to make at Great Lanefield.

Oddly enough, her thoughts would return to the situation between herself and Carfrae; to his changed tactics. She thought she preferred the challenging opponent to the desperate wooer. The clash of wills was stimulating. It seemed to have put new spirit into her. She felt that evening less unhappy, less resentful, more interested in life than at any time since Carfrae's return. . . .

Her thought conjured up a memory of his face as it had looked when, in the car the day before, he had turned it to her . . . its eloquence . . . he

could look like that . . . she had power to call up such a look.

Then, as if suggested by some influence outside herself, there flashed upon her mind a picture of the face of the man whom, soon after that poignant moment, they had passed in the road. Something in his expression had made her uneasy, though she could not have explained why. Happily, Adney was completely reassured concerning him.

This thought brought another in its train. Where was Adney now? Was he on the watch as usual? She had not seen him anywhere about. All had of late been so serene that insensibly vigilance had been somewhat relaxed. In his own grounds, Carfrae was presumably quite safe, but . . .

She glanced about her at the wide sweep of sloping pasture, rich golden-green in the sunset; the cows lazily chewing, the flight of rooks against a golden sky, the solitude and peace of everything.

Suddenly she stood quite still.

Carfrae was alone—he was out of her sight. There had hardly been a moment since his return during which he had been out of sight of herself, Lyndsay, or Adney, except in his own house.

She felt certain afterwards that nothing was farther from her thought at this juncture than any idea of treachery connected with the La Placis. She was moved by an impulse too obscure to be called a purpose; but it was borne in upon her that she had better go back and wait for Carfrae. It would be less awful to miss her appointment than that any-

thing . . . She would not specify; yet for a long moment she wavered, because it was very possible that Carfrae might misconstrue her return. In spite of the reluctance which this thought inspired, she nevertheless began to retrace her steps.

She did not hurry. She walked in the sauntering, leisurely fashion of one who expects that the person waited for may at any moment come into sight.

She covered, however, the whole distance back to Dairy Lodge without his appearing. As she approached, she could hear the humming of a motor, stationary in the lane outside the park gates. The house, blocking out her view of the bit of lane where this car was standing, prevented her from seeing it. She was not conscious of taking any particular notice of the fact that it was there, or of wondering why: she was merely subconsciously aware of its presence. Passing into the lodge garden by the little white gate, she walked up to the front door, which, to her surprise, was closed. Usually it stood hospitably open, showing the small porch and an inner white door. She tried the handle and found it locked.

This struck her as extremely odd. Carfrae had entered the house not ten minutes before, and must be coming out again very shortly.

Without a second's delay she turned to the left and ran round the house until she came to the window of the sitting-room, which opened to the ground. It still stood open, but as she advanced a hand was placed upon it from within to close it.

"Stop!" she cried, running swiftly forward.

It was Caterina who stood by the window, and as her eyes fell upon Valery she looked quite startled. Glancing back over her shoulder at someone inside the room she said hurriedly in English, "It is Lady Caron come back——"

Val pushed past her into the pretty room she had so lately quitted. The only sign of Carfrae was his hat, which lay upon the table; but there were three persons present, all strangers to her—two ladies, who seemed to have just arrived, and a man who sat in the shadow of the ingle-nook.

One lady was standing near him, engaged in talk: Her back was turned to Valery, and she wore a light-coloured, loudly patterned motoring coat and a tomato-coloured toque over yellow hair. The other, at the far end of the room, was occupied in adjusting a blue veil over a blue toque, and was clad in a long coat of the same shade of royal blue.

Val concluded that they had just come to pay a call, and must have arrived in the car which she had heard in the lane.

"Please, Caterina," said she, bowing slightly in their direction, "I have come back to pick up Sir Carfrae—where is he?"

"Sir Carfrae 'e 'ave gone, meladi——"

"Oh, nonsense, I should have seen him—and he can't have gone without his hat."

"To ze stables, meladi," stammered Caterina. "'E say 'e 'ave not seen ze garage. Miss La Placi take 'eem that way—weel you go find 'eem, meladi?"

"Oh, thank you," said Val, with a sigh of relief which showed her how sharp her momentary anxiety had been. This was simple enough. Unexpected visitors had arrived, and the old ladies were still occupied with their honoured guest. She took up the hat from the table. "Did Sir Carfrae look into the secret room?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, meladi, 'e did."

"Then I'll take his hat to him, and I needn't come back." She turned, with a smile and a slight apology, to hasten out by the window which Caterina most politely held open for her.

Something in the woman's air—her obvious satisfaction—her little smirk of triumph—caused Lady Caron to pause in the very act of leaving the room. She turned abruptly, unexpectedly, to look behind her.

The man in the ingle-nook was leaning forward intently to watch her go. The light fell upon his face. It was the man whom yesterday she had passed in the road.

Valery was not conscious that her mind acted at all. So far as she had any theory about it, she supposed the three persons in the room to be visitors just arrived on the scene—a fact which her having seen one of them fifteen miles away the day before in no way traversed; but something within her, which was not reason, came spontaneously into action, and without a word she darted back to the side of the fireplace and tried the door of the secret chamber.

Her action was so swift and so unlooked-for that the man was taken off his guard and made the mistake of catching her by the wrist. "What are you doing?" he asked angrily.

Her look of astonished indignation caused him to let go as if the touch had burnt him.

"Kindly open this door for me," said she.

"Ze key, 'e not 'ere," said Caterina eagerly. "Mees La Placi she 'ave 'eem in 'er pocket—you ask 'er for 'eem, meladi."

Valery paused a minute in wretched indecision. The woman in blue, who had stood all this time at the mirror, suddenly spoke without turning round.

"If you're after the guy that just went out to the garage with Miss La Placi, you've got to shake a leg if you don't want to miss him. He's just off up that field in double-quick time."

She spoke with a marked American accent.

"I don't believe it," said Valery in a low, frightened voice; "and I intend to look inside the secret room; so go at once, Caterina, and say to Miss La Placi that I want the key."

Caterina glanced from one face to the other, and then, as if in obedience to some unspoken bidding, slipped out into the garden.

A great cold fear stole over Valery. She was conscious that the three people in the room were all standing as it were at attention—that they were watching her as cats watch a mouse. There was but one hope, and it was a very slender one. Just possibly the whistle might bring Adney, but she had

caught no glimpse of him, or of Baker, anywhere about, and she had the despairing feeling of being completely abandoned.

She began to fumble with the gold chain on which she wore the whistle concealed within her dress. The man thought she was fumbling for a weapon and made a quick movement.

"Hands up!" he cried sharply; and she turned to see the revolver in his hand pointed straight at her.

For a moment the shock of realising that her worst suspicions were true paralysed her. Slowly she lifted her arms, staring as if hypnotised at the little circular orifice of the weapon. Her eyes took on a blank, unseeing gaze, and the man chuckled, sure that in a moment she would faint away.

Her mind, however, was working clearly. She decided that even if it meant instant death the whistle must be blown. She began to sway on her feet, she rolled up her eyes until only the whites showed. "Oh, I'm fainting!" she cried suddenly, dropping into a chair and grasping at her throat with both hands.

In a second she had snatched out the whistle, disregarding the man's furious shout of warning; and she had time to blow, once, twice, long piercing blasts upon it before the brute shot her at short range.

It was hardly painful, more like a buffet of air, which hit her so hard that she was knocked backwards. She felt sure that she could not be shot

because she saw and heard so clearly—heard the woman in the blue hat say furiously, “I always knew if we let you in on this, you all-fired idiot, you’d queer it.”

“Queer nothing!” was the angry retort. “We’re a few yards from the public road here—was I to let her go on whistling?”

“She might whistle herself black in the face. Nobody ever goes along that road, and, as I told you, we’ve called off the guard.”

Those words fell like doom on the girl’s failing perceptions. They had called off the guard! Nobody had heard her whistle. She had given her life in vain, for she had not saved Carfrae. . . . She was but faintly aware that she was being tied to the chair whereon she lay huddled . . . dimly she knew that there was movement all about her, people were hurrying, urging each other to haste . . . and then a voice close to her ear uttered these mysterious words:

“Is the gas full on? Make sure. Right!”

There followed silence and thick waves of darkness that deepened into night.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE S.O.S. CALL

THAT afternoon, as Adney and Baker sat at tea, after bringing Sir Carfrae home from his meeting, the parlourmaid came to say that someone was asking for Mr. Adney on the telephone.

Off went Adney, and found that he was being called by the Marterstead police.

They wanted him to come over to them as fast as he could get there in order to identify someone whom they had just apprehended, whose movements seemed to them to be more than suspicious.

Adney, full of excitement, promised to come at once, and hurried back to the servants' hall to see if he could get a lift from Baker.

"I can't take you," said Baker. "I've got to drive Miss Kirby and her ladyship right in the opposite direction to Great Lanefield."

"Get out the little car and let her ladyship drive herself. She would, I know. This is very important."

"What's the colonel doing now?" asked Baker after a pause.

"Gone down the park with her ladyship, to call on those two old Spanish scarecrows at the Lodge."

"Safe?" asked Baker. "What price you and me both going off and leaving him?"

"Should think he's safe enough in the park," said Adney thoughtfully, "more especially now that they've put their hands on this merchant. However, I think perhaps I'd better run down to Marterstead on my push-bike and I'll go and ask Miss Kirby if she thinks her ladyship would drive herself this evening, and then you can toddle off down the park and do sentry till you see him and her coming back."

After finishing his tea he went off, therefore, and spoke to Miss Kirby. She objected to Lady Carfrae's having to drive, when she was due to make a speech upon her arrival. She was already almost over-done, and they must be careful of her. Miss Kirby, however, did not like the idea that nobody was on guard.

"If you really think that Sir Carfrae is in danger, the paddock is by no means safe—there are plenty of places in those coppices where a man could hide," said she reflectively. "I must ask you not to go to Marterstead until Sir Carfrae comes in, Adney," she added decidedly. "Ring up the inspector and tell him you can't come for another hour at the least. Then go and take up your guard."

Adney thought this was sound advice. He went back to the hall, took off the receiver, and called up the Marterstead police.

"What's biting you?" came the derisive answer over the wire. "We haven't called you up. We've made no arrest. Somebody's having a joke with you, my son, although it's not the first of April."

"Here, hold on! Don't ring off!" shouted

Adney, his sharp brain suddenly leaping to an entirely new view of the position. "Are you there? Well, something's afoot—get that? I've had a bogus message, and you may bet it was sent to get me out of the way. Is the inspector in? Thanks be. Then give him this, word for word. Tell him Sir Carfrae has gone down to the Dairy Lodge, close to the park gate in Moorside Lane. There'll be an attempt on his life—it may have been made already—but in any case ask the inspector to dash round to the park gate in Moorside Lane as fast as his car can bring him, and to take a couple of hefty chaps along."

Hanging up the receiver the moment he obtained assurance that this should be done, he burst wildly into the hall, where Baker was just rising from table.

"Here, Baker! We must run for our lives! Take a big stick, man. That was a bogus police call I had. By the mercy of God I rang up and found out! Leg it as never in your life before—we may be too late, but we've got to try."

"You got your revolver?" gasped Baker, overturning his chair and hurling himself out of the door. "Lord! What I'd give for the feel of my sword-baynit!"

"Oh, the fool I've been!" panted Adney, as side by side they sprinted down the paddock. "To think, if Miss Kirby hadn't bid me call 'em up I should never have known! 'Twas a smart idea to get you and me both safe out of their road——"

Baker, as he ran, jerked out of himself comments

whose profanity might have withered the turf over which they were careering.

Just as they topped the slight rise from which the Dairy Lodge became visible they heard a whistle—once, twice—then silence.

"Oh, my Lord, if we're too late I'll cut my throat!" cried Adney in anguish. "That's her ladyship's S.O.S. call—where is she? I don't see a sign of anybody anywhere, do you?"

"Make for the house, if you ask me," counselled Baker. "After all, you know, them two old girls, they're only Dagoes all said an' done. I wouldn't put any dirty trick past 'em myself——"

"You're right. Run, man, run if it kills you!"

They bore down upon the lodge at top speed. Never a sound or movement could they hear as they approached. All was quiet except for the sound of a car in the lane beyond, just starting away. The locked front door detained them for a minute or two; then, as Val had done, they skirted round the house, looking for a means of entrance.

The sitting-room window was not only closed but bolted, and the room seemed to them at first to be vacant. Then Baker, who had been flattening his nose against the glass, whispered:

"See that chair, turned back to us? There's something—someone—in it. It's shaking."

The S.O.S. call had made them desperate. They set their shoulders to the windows, shivered the glass, burst in.

Half-sitting, half-lying in the big chair was Lady

Caron, her hands and feet tied with rope. Her head had fallen sideways, and at first Adney thought her dead. Between her shoulder and her breast, on the right side, a small dark circle of blood showed against her white summer frock.

"My lady, my lady!" urged Adney frantically, as he began to untie her. "Can you hear, can you understand?"

Her eyes opened. She looked at him, and he could see a faint flicker, a gleam of relief, cross her features. It was followed by an expression of acute anxiety. Her brows knit themselves as in horror, she began desperately to struggle for speech.

"If only I had a drop of brandy!"

"Here," broke in Baker, "there's some on the table. They've been having a nip before making their get-away. It may be poisoned, but risk it."

Adney forced some neat spirit into Valery's mouth, and she made a visible effort and swallowed it. The effect was almost instantaneous. She uttered a sound, though inarticulate.

"Yes, yes—try to tell us—life and death—it hangs on you. Where's Sir Carfrae? What have they done to him?"

"See—se—se—" she began, but her throat refused its office. After a pitiful struggle her eyes closed and two tears of despair crept under the lids.

"More brandy!" cried Adney fiercely.

"Ain't brandy bad for a gunshot wound?"

"That don't matter, we got to make her speak."

The potent spirit was taken this time with less

difficulty. It seemed to galvanise the girl's whole frame. She almost lifted herself from the chair. "Secret room—secret room!" she shrieked. "Poison gas! Quick! Quick! Quick!"

With that she collapsed totally, her frame sank together, she slipped down and lay quite still.

"She's gone," said Adney jerkily. "Plucky girl! She's told us, though. But, God help me, I don't know where the secret room is! Poison gas! We shall be too late!"

"I know where that room is," broke in Baker, "or I ought to. Mr. Eldrid, he showed me, one evening we was down here, before the place was let. Let me think now. It was a room that opened on the garden—if I don't make a great mistake it was this very room we're in, with that deep fireplace. *Here it is!*"

He leapt to the side of the ingle-nook and shook the panel. "Where's your gun, Bill? Blow out the catch!"

Adney flew to his side. The girl was forgotten. In a few seconds they had blown out the lock and pushed open the door.

It was pitch dark, and the smell of gas rolled out into the room; but it was not the overpowering stench with which men who had been in the trenches were familiar which came to their nostrils, but the ordinary fumes of household gas.

Adney had hardly taken a step within when he stumbled over Caron's body. Swiftly he hauled him forth and dragged him not only out into the

room, but through the window, laying him in the fresh air upon the grass of the garden, where he at once proceeded to loosen his clothing and make the motions of artificial respiration with the nimbleness of one trained to First Aid. "He's not dead—it's only ordinary gas—he's got a chance," he cried vehemently.

"Hadn't I better go for the doctor this minute?" urged Baker distractedly.

"Too late for her ladyship—and how do I know whether any of those devils are still about? Better not leave me alone—watch out, so as not to be surprised! There now, I can hear somebody coming—a footstep, wasn't it?"

"Thank God, it's Mr. Eldrid," replied Baker in tones of most profound thankfulness.

Lyndsay appeared round the corner of the house, running madly; at sight of the motionless form on the grass he gave a cry of horror.

"Oh, Adney, have you let them get him?"

"He'll do, sir; he's coming round already, breathing," Adney told him, continuing his work without a pause; "but I'm afraid they've done in her ladyship."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE FALSE CALLS

MISS KIRBY came downstairs, attired for the meeting, sunshade in hand, and putting on her gloves. She was vexed to find that, in spite of her orders to Adney, neither Baker nor the car were in evidence.

She stepped out into the drive, glanced round, and not seeing what she looked for returned through the house, out upon the terrace, where, shading her eyes, she watched to see if Valery were approaching up the park.

There was no sign of her, and it was already close upon seven o'clock, the hour of the meeting.

Kirdles felt a little apprehensive, seeing that Carfrae and Valery were together. It was just possible that the man's feelings had once more proved too strong for him, and he might be detaining Valery and distressing her. That, however, seemed hardly probable, since she was going to Great Lanefield entirely on his account, and it was most important for him that election work should be done.

Restlessly Kirdles returned to the front of the house. Still no sign of the car, but to her relief she saw Lyndsay on his motor-cycle approaching. He had been busy on the other side of the constituency all day, canvassing, and he looked fagged as he drew

up at the door. It was extremely hot still—only six by the right time, though seven by the clocks.

"Want to speak to me?" he asked, and she replied: "If you are going round to the garage, I wish you to speak sharply to Baker. He should have been at the door a quarter of an hour ago. I'll go meanwhile and ring up Great Lanefield, where Valery is due to make a speech in about five minutes' time."

"Great Lanefield?" asked Lyn incredulously. "Val going to Great Lanefield—now? How curious!"

"Why curious?"

"I've just come from there; stopped to have a talk with the chap who's working up the village for us, and he said he was sorry they had to drop the meeting for this week, but hoped to get one before the election."

Kirdles started. "They rang us up soon after lunch," said she. "Asked especially for her ladyship, as she had made such an impression at Lufton yesterday. I had better call them now and make certain. Have you the number?"

Lyn took a letter from his pocket and handed it to her. He got off his machine and went into the hall with her.

"Better make sure before giving Baker his orders," said he.

The matter was soon set at rest. No meeting was taking place in Great Lanefield, and nobody had rung up from thence.

Kirdles was completely puzzled. She told of the call which Adney had had from the police, and said she supposed that Baker and he must have gone over to Marterstead. At the moment Blair, the parlour-maid, came through the hall, and Miss Kirby, in some agitation, asked if she knew where Adney and Baker were.

"They both ran off down the park as fast as they could, miss," said Blair. "Mr. Adney rushed into the hall and said he had had a bogus police call, and that he thought something was wrong. I heard him telling the police to take a car and go to Dairy Lodge as fast as they could."

"Good Heavens, Lyn, they're both down there! Two calls—one to take Adney away and one to take Val! But she's not here—*my child's not come back!* . . . Lyn, Lyn, what have they done to her?"

Lyn made no reply. Without one word he ran back to the drive, leapt on his machine and rode off, round the house and down the paddock, disappearing almost like a conjuring trick.

Kirdles, for almost the first time in her strong, useful life, turned faint. She collapsed into a chair in the hall, and Blair did the most sensible thing she could by taking her fan and fanning her.

Out of the anguish of her mind the first thought that fell from her lips was, "And it was I who advised her to come back!" Then a ray of consolation shone out. It was not Val against whose life there were designs. Suppose the worst had hap-

pened, and Carfrae had been shot—well, that removed the great difficulty from Val's life. She would be free. . . .

"Give me a drink of water," gasped the poor soul, rising to her feet. "I am going down the paddock."

Blair produced what she asked for, and after drinking Miss Kirby set out, hurrying down the carriage road as fast as her not very great powers of locomotion would permit.

She could hear the sound of voices as she drew near to the Dairy Lodge—loud and angry voices, raised in altercation; but when she had tried the locked door in vain, and, like everybody else, had then walked round the house into the garden, she stopped short. Caron lay upon the grass, his head and shoulders propped against Adney, his face like death.

She could see nobody else, though the loud voices still reached her from the little stable-yard; but before she had found breath to speak a police inspector came through the garden, and on seeing her touched his hat respectfully.

"Bad business, miss," he said. "We were too late, but we have done one thing—we have got the whole lot of them."

Kirby felt a trembling of the legs, and her own voice sounded strange to her as it came from her lips. "Is Sir Carfrae shot?"

"No—gassed. He's coming round. . . . His

servant and the chauffeur got him out just in time."

"And . . . Lady Caron?"

The man hesitated. "Her ladyship was shot," he then said in a low voice. "Mr. Eldrid is in there with her."

The cry uttered by Kirdles pierced even the dulled senses of the stupefied Carfrae. He raised his head and opened his eyes. Meanwhile the lady rushed into the sitting-room, wherein the fumes of gas still lingered, and stood for a moment rocking on her feet, feeling that unless she kept very tight hold of herself she would lose her senses.

Lyndsay had dispatched Baker on his motor-cycle for the doctor, had removed Valery's hat and placed her upon the sofa, with a pillow under her head.

She lay with closed eyes, almost as if asleep, her hand still clutching the silver whistle which hung about her neck.

Lyn had opened her dress, and after ransacking the cottage, had found a clean towel with which he had made a pad; but he had nothing with which to secure it.

Kirdles knelt down. Her lips shook so that she could hardly articulate. "Is she gone?" she wailed.

"No. I thought she was dead, but she can't be, for she is still bleeding. However, I should think it was an affair of moments," he answered in a voice she hardly knew. The light had gone out of his face; he was frowning in his efforts to keep back tears.

Kirdles had crammed into her bag a bottle of disinfectant, some lint and a roller bandage. She saturated the lint, adjusted it carefully, and then she and Lyndsay between them contrived to raise Valery and to pass the bandage two or three times round her body so as to hold the compress on the wound.

It looked so small and the bleeding was so slight. . . .

That done, they remained, Lyn on his knees, she crouched upon a low chair, waiting in a helpless, hopeless silence.

After a very few minutes, which seemed hours, the inspector came to the window.

"If there's no more you can do here, would you be so kind as to come to the garage for a minute?" he asked. "Both Miss Kirby and Mr. Eldrid? I want you to identify your late tenants."

Miss Kirby looked up aghast. "Our late tenants? You don't say the La Placis had anything to do with this?"

"I'm afraid there is no doubt but they had, miss. This way, please. We won't keep you a minute."

The police car almost filled the little yard. In it sat two women and a man, handcuffed. The women were noisy and abusive.

"Adney and the chauffeur, they've both identified the man as having seen him yesterday on the road near Lufton," said the inspector; "but what about these two?" He indicated the tomato and the blue lady, who sat glaring.

"Oh, no, no, I'm thankful to say these are not the

least bit like the Misses La Placi!" cried Kirdles in her relief.

One of the police interrupted the triumphant laugh and, "There you see!" of his prisoners. He coolly put out his hand and lifted the tomato toque and yellow hair bodily from the head of one of them, her coarse black hair, screwed into a ball upon her head, becoming visible.

Miss Kirby uttered a startled exclamation. "It is—it isn't—well, it isn't really *like* Miss La Placi, but it *might* be she," she stammered.

Both the women burst into a fresh volley of abuse of the police and of England, in which country harmless tourists were seized upon and carried off, subjected to horrible indignities.

The police, however, had unstrapped and opened the luggage carried in the big touring car. They set a pretty silvery wig upon the woman's head, and surmounted it with a mushroom hat and strings. There sat the old lady, a fiendish caricature of herself, but indubitably she who had driven in her pony cart about the village for so many months.

"Lord have mercy on us, how blind we were," cried Kirdles, "but who could have supposed? They were such model tenants—such great ladies!"

"They're as clever as old Nick himself," returned the inspector drily, "but I think their wings are clipped for a bit. However, if Adney hadn't called us and told us to come along sharp, they'd have made their get-away all right."

"Who shot Lady Caron?" gasped Kirdles in an almost inaudible voice.

"The man, I think; but they all three had guns on them."

"How—did it happen?"

"We don't know yet, miss. We haven't had time to find out. All we can say for certain is what the chauffeur told us—that her ladyship managed to get out her whistle and make the signal agreed upon before she was shot; and she was still conscious, or partly, when they found her, and managed to tell them where Sir Carfrae was before she collapsed."

"And where was he?"

"In the secret room. They filled it with gas. If all had happened as they planned—if Lady Caron had left him and gone hurrying home to keep her imaginary appointment—then they would have been off and nobody would have known what had become of Sir Carfrae. Everyone knew the old girls were just starting for Brighton—their goings would have excited no surprise; and we should have beaten every plantation and dragged every pond before we thought of searching the cottage."

As he spoke wheels were heard in the lane and the doctor drove up.

"Now," said Kirdles, wiping her trembling lips and turning her grey, haggard face to Lyn, "we shall know the worst—we shall know the worst!"

CHAPTER XXX

CAR, M.P.

IN Marterstead the crowd before the Town Hall was dense and a-tiptoe with expectation. It seemed ages later than they had expected before the long window of the Town Hall opened at last, and the Town Clerk emerged upon the balcony with a slip of paper in his hand. He announced that Sir Carfrae Caron was elected member for the division; and the roars of cheering which immediately broke out almost drowned his subsequent reading of the figures.

Then he held the window open while Sir Carfrae came out, followed by Sir George Bowyer, his agents, and other leaders of his party in the constituency.

It was Sir George who spoke first—an old favourite. Leaning over down to the crowd, he told them that Sir Carfrae's majority was nearly two thousand—his predecessor of the same politics having been defeated at the previous election by more than two thousand.

"That," exulted Sir George, "means a turnover of nearly four thousand votes; and we rejoice that in spite of the dastardly and un-English attempt upon our new member's life, he is able to be here this evening, and to thank you all for your support."

Caron placed himself beside his old friend, and

the crowd let itself go. The prolonged cheering culminated in "For he's a jolly good fellow!" lustily bawled by the rough Martershire throats; and then they began to shout for Lady Caron.

"Her ladyship! Three cheers for her ladyship!"

On that, Sir Carfrah lifted his hand and made a sign for silence. In the flare of the lamps and torches his face looked ghastly and drawn; but his voice was steady.

"Nobody," he said, "would rejoice more heartily than my wife to know the result of our work. Nobody has worked harder than she has to bring it about. Were it not for her heroism and devotion I, as you already know, should not be here to thank you for the confidence you have placed in me. But Lady Caron lies still between life and death; and so, although I should wish to be longer among you this evening, I am going to ask you to allow me to go home at once and quietly, as I feel that at the present time my place is at her side."

The words were simple, almost bare; but the tone and manner were everything. The man's evident misery, his torture of anxiety, was plain for all to read. Their hearts went out to him. Then a voice in the crowd cried, "Three cheers for her ladyship!" and a man near the balcony shouted up—

"When she gets better she'll be pleased to know we give 'er three good 'uns, sir!" Another voice bawled lustily, "Tell her we put our shirts on you!"

There was a roar of appreciation, and the "three good 'uns" were given with a will.

Caron waited at the balustrade until the sounds

died away. He was trying to speak again. Once, twice, he tried; but his voice failed him. He turned away, having accomplished more by silence than by speech.

"My! Ain't he fond of 'er!" said the mothers and wives one to another. "Parted on their weddin' day, and now they've not had a bare three months!" "If she don't live, I suppose 'e'll never get over it."

Lyndsay came forward to utter the words that were needed. "Sir Carfrae asks me to tell you that if—that *when*—her ladyship is well enough to receive the message she shall hear of your kindness to her this night."

The cordial words and cries of encouragement pursued them when they were shut into the car together, and Baker was driving carefully down Market Cross and round into the Winstable Road. Carfrae lay back as if exhausted; but after a few minutes he leaned forward, dropping his forehead in his hands. Lyn fidgeted. There was something he wanted to say, but he lacked the courage.

The doctors had cut and scarred the delicate white flesh of Valery's back and extracted the bullet which had lodged in a rib. The wound was clean; but they feared some unsuspected trouble in connection with the lung, very near to which the shot had passed, for she could not be induced to swallow food.

She had never been fully conscious since the moment when, with a last supreme effort of will, she held death at bay until she had done her utmost to save Caron.

She did not seem to understand nor respond when spoken to, though she had several times pressed Miss Kirby's hand when begged to do so. They had to feed her by injection, and she lay all day with her eyes closed, growing so restless at night that they were forced to administer opiates, which naturally increased the daily drowsiness.

By the doctor's orders nobody had spoken to her of anything that had passed, nor had Caron entered her room.

They had not carried her to her own quarters on the top floor, but to a guest-room below. She had manifested no surprise, nor ever asked where she was.

That morning both their own doctor and the great specialist who extracted the bullet had examined her; and Kirdles knew that they had but little hope. She was sinking—very slowly—but still sinking. Unless something could be done to induce her to come out of her torpor and to swallow nourishment naturally, she would gradually slip away out of existence.

It was the knowledge of their opinion which was driving Lyn to speak.

"Car," said he, after a long silence, "I want to say something."

Caron started from reverie. "Well?" he asked drearily.

"You know—the doctors are not satisfied with Val?"

"I know."

"Well, I think they are making an awful mistake in keeping you away from her."

After turning this over in his mind, "What makes you think so?" asked Caron.

"Well, I mean . . . it seems like giving her away . . . but perhaps you know it already."

"Know what?"

"That Valery is head over ears in love with you."

"That's rot."

"By no means. I know it, Kirdles knows it. If she doesn't care about you, why is her hatred so hot against you? I didn't myself realise it until you came home, but now I see it clearly. She's afraid of herself. What do you suppose made her go back to the lodge that day after you had parted in the park?"

"I suppose we never shall know that."

"If you want to know, why not go and ask her?"

"She takes no notice of anybody."

"It's my belief that she would notice you, even if it was only to fly into a rage; at least it would break up her lethargy."

"I've made up my mind that if they tell me definitely there's no hope, I shall go in and try to get her to forgive me."

"I wouldn't wait till then. She is in the same state now that she fell into after you left her and went off to Africa. Her whole life-force is founded upon love."

"She told me the very day before she was shot that she hadn't an ounce of sentiment in her whole composition."

"I think that's true. She isn't sentimental. It's much deeper than that. She's an 'all or nothing' woman. There are not many of them; but she's one. With her, it's you or nobody."

Caron gazed out into the gathering night with eyes which held a faint dawn of hope. "If I dared . . . but suppose it were to kill her?"

"I tell you it wouldn't kill her. I believe she'd eat if she thought you wanted her to try. I was watching her to-day, and she seemed to me like a watch running down, as if what she wanted was rewinding. I believe her to be fully conscious, but there's a cloud of some kind on her mind. My idea is that she thinks you are dead, though she never has asked. She may suppose that to be the only possible explanation of your not having come to see her."

"By Jove, there may be something in that! . . . But how do *you* know?" with a passing flash of curiosity.

Lyndsay did not reply. It was fortunate that the fast falling night hid the rush of blood to his face; and Carfrae's mind soon ceased to occupy itself with the answer to his question. He was far too deeply absorbed in his own tragedy to have time to do more than surmise the existence of Lyn's.

It had taken the latter so long to screw up his courage to the point of saying what he wished to say that the swift car was already at their destination before more could be added.

As they entered the house Miss Kirby met them.

She looked grey and old, and the polite interest with which she asked for their news was a very feeble shadow of what her eagerness would have been in happier circumstances.

"It's all right. A majority for us of over a thousand," Lyn assured her, and sighed, even in communicating good news.

Caron handed his hat to Blair, who shyly begged to offer her congratulations. He thanked her wearily, turned immediately to Kirdles, and asked abruptly, "How is she?"

"Very bad to-night," she answered, turning away to hide the working of her mouth which would not be controlled. "She is feverish and in pain, but she won't speak nor look at me. The nurse thinks . . . she thinks . . ." She turned away, unable to continue.

"What does she think?" abruptly asked Caron.

"That the end is—quite—near. The pulse is failing rapidly."

"That settles it," said Carfrae abruptly. "I am going in to see her."

Kirdles turned her anguished, mottled face to him, her hands wrung together. "Yes—do! Do!" she cried. "It's the only hope—the only chance! If—if she thought you loved her she might want to stay——"

"If she thought I loved her," echoed Caron huskily.

Without another word he strode past Miss Kirby, up the stair and into the sick-room.

At sight of him the nurse by the bedside looked up, startled. She sprang to her feet, motioning him away. He went forward and spoke in carefully dropped tones.

"I am taking this matter into my own hands," he said. "You will please give me the nourishment which Lady Caron ought to take, and I will see that she has it."

"But you don't know," she whispered, "you don't understand how critical it is."

"I do, and that is why I am here. I accept all responsibility. Give me the food please, and then go away. I will call you when I want you."

Without comprehending how, the nurse found herself outside the room. Catching sight of Miss Kirby coming towards her along the corridor she ran to implore help. Kirdles drew her into her own room and shut the door.

Meanwhile Caron walked to the bedside and gazed down upon the wasted frame of his wife. In spite of her pallor, the nightly recurring fever had brought a spot of burning red to each cheek. The lashes of her closed eyes looked almost startling in their contrast. Her hair had been bobbed, as its length and thickness interfered with the nursing and increased the deathly perspirations from which she suffered. She looked pathetically young.

Caron's face as he gazed down upon her showed but little of the passions which rent him. He sat down beside her pillow.

"Come, Val," said he in his usual tones, "open your eyes. Time to have your supper."

A shudder ran through the girl's whole body. Her hands, which had been moving restlessly to and fro, suddenly became still. Evidently she had heard what he said.

Stooping, he passed his left arm under her and raised her so that her head lay against his shoulder. "You must tell me if I hurt you," said he gently, "but this nasty business of feeding has got to be put through."

He became aware that she was trying to whisper something, and strained his ears to catch the almost inaudible mutter. "Then—you're—not—dead?"

She had spoken. His pulses raced with excitement.

"No, my girl, I'm still alive to plague you. Look at me and see."

The blue-veined lids lifted. She looked at him long and earnestly. "Thought you were dead," she whispered.

"Not I. I'm here in your room—the thing you specially forbade. And what's more, I shan't go out till you have drunk all this."

He put the feeding-cup to her lips and she drank.

"Good," said he, though it was all he could do to speak steadily, so tremendous was his agitation. "I thought that threat would work."

As she lay back, gasping, against his breast, he thought he saw just the ghost of a smile upon her lips.

He waited a minute or two, his whole mind poised in anticipation. So far down the slope was she that he feared the reaction might be too much. But

realising that the first thing was to reinforce her bodily weakness, he once more held the feeding-cup to her, and this time she drank steadily and took more than one draught.

"You are a brick," said he. "Clever girl! I shall give you a certificate for good conduct! All done by kindness, too! I haven't beaten you, have I?"

Her eyes opened quite widely. She turned their gaze up to his face, bending over. He could see that she was quite conscious—her look searched his very soul. His eyes smiled down into hers. It was as if he desired to provoke or tease her.

"Come! You won't be able to get up off that bed and kick me out unless you go on feeding!" he taunted.

She drained the cup to its dregs.

"Well," said he exultantly, "you certainly are the best patient in the world! That frees you for the next two hours; but I don't want to put you down yet. I think you've been lying there on the flat of your back too long. Just shut your eyes and have a nap like this—I'm sure you're comfy, and so am I."

Again he thought he saw that faintest sketch of a smile about her lips. But her terrible weakness asserted itself, and the lids slowly fell over her eyes.

She made no motion to be put down, accepting his dictatorship quite as a matter of course.

He braced himself against the bedhead, putting both his arms about her, and laying down his cheek upon the top of her head. In less than half an hour he knew she slept profoundly.

Then he laid her down, crossed the room in his stockinged feet, opened the door and showed two amazed women the empty cup in his hand.

"She's asleep," he said, "and breathing easily. I shall stay in the room all night, so that whenever she wakes she will find me there. What fools doctors are! She had been thinking I was dead!"

"How do you know?"

"She said so."

"What—just now? She spoke to you?"

"Certainly. She said, 'I thought you were dead.' I told her she was not so easily rid of me."

Kirdles turned and made a dash for her room, sobbing audibly in the revulsion of feeling. Caron came after her, put his arms round her shoulders, soothed her as if she had been his mother. "I only wish I had defied the fools a week ago," said he. "Now give me a kiss and wish me luck. I'm going back in case she misses me."

But Valery slept twelve hours without moving.

When at last she awakened he was there beside her, a queer smile on his face. She gave him an answering smile, and he said at once, "Now, no talking! You are not to begin to pitch into me until you are fed. Better lift you again as I did last night—you seemed to drink very comfortably like that."

She made no objection at all. Deftly he raised her, and propped her against him, and once more fed her. This time she ate with obvious appetite,

swallowing down the meat-juice and milk as if her system craved for it.

"Fine!" said Carfrae. "You'll be having eggs and bacon to-morrow if you are such an exemplary girl."

"Well, I'm hungry," said Val almost aloud.

"I don't wonder," he replied tenderly, stroking back her hair and longing to kiss the pale forehead. "You do know who I am, don't you, Val?" he inquired after a minute.

She turned up her eyes to him with that same eloquent but indescribable look she had given him the previous night. "Car," said she softly.

"That's not all," he murmured fondling her hand. "I'm not only Car now, I'm Car, M.P. What does your ladyship think of that?"

She uttered a faint little squeak of surprise. "Is it over . . . the election?"

"Yes. I'm in by a thousand and more. Just about the number of people there were that day you spoke for me in the Lufton Town Hall. You did it, my dear."

"Nonsense," said she in faint amusement; and after a pause. "Where's nurse? I've got ever such a pretty bed-jacket. I want her to put it on me."

"I suppose that means that I'm to go," he said, "and as I've had no breakfast, I will take your ladyship's hint. But don't you flatter yourself that you've done with me. I'm going to pester you with food by night and day until you are strong enough to get up and lock the door."

CHAPTER XXXI

WHAT COMES NEXT?

THE Sir Carfrae Caron who went down that day to his committee-rooms to receive the congratulations of his agents, and to thank as many of his constituents as he could find, was a different being from the tired, haggard man who had stood over-night upon the balcony listening through the plaudits to the creeping foot of death menacing him ever more closely.

Though he had not closed his eyes that night he was full of spirit and fire, and, as on the previous evening, everyone said, "How devoted he is to her, isn't he?"

"You think she has really turned the corner?" asked Sir George Bowyer.

"I think so," replied Caron exultantly. "She has no fever this morning, she slept naturally for about twelve hours, and her pulse is astonishingly stronger than yesterday. If she keeps it up we ought to have no more trouble. This morning she was well enough to hear the news of my success, and it bucked her no end."

"You haven't yet heard from her how she came to return to Dairy Lodge that day?"

"No. I am sure she remembers all that hap-

pened, but I don't want to mention anything that might agitate her until she's a very great deal stronger than she now is. All I can tell you is that I parted from her some little way up the park. They calculated to a nicety exactly how far from the house I should be stopped, so as to make it quite certain that she would go on and that I should return to the lodge without her. She walked on quietly but not very slowly, as she was, you remember, expecting to go to Great Lanefield at once, to speak at a meeting which did not exist."

"And you went back?"

"Yes. The old ladies seemed quite genuinely delighted that I should see into the hidey-hole. One of them was lighting a candle. The other pushed open the door.

"'You may walk in freely, there is no step,'" said she with a beaming smile. Like a fool I walked calmly in and heard the door click behind me instantaneously. Of course, I realised at once that I had been trapped, and I felt furious. My idea was that they would go off for their holiday and leave me there . . . shut up to starve or suffocate. I thought this not a very serious probability, for of course I knew that search would be made for me before long. Granting that nobody missed me until Val returned from the meeting, I should not have to be there more than an hour or two, even supposing I was not able to open the door with a knife. I tried cautiously to find the keyhole, and soon became aware that it was stopped at the outer end by some-

thing I could not remove. However, almost at once, before I could think of any other plan, I perceived a deadly smell of gas. It was rushing in; and then I knew that, long before help arrived, I should be suffocated. As I think you know, the chamber is surrounded with an air jacket through which no sound can penetrate. I yelled and I kicked at the door; but the space was small and the fumes soon did their work."

"And by the time Adney and Baker got there she had been shot?"

"Yes. They found her tied to a chair. She was far too seriously injured to be able to explain anything; but she literally forced herself to tell them where I was. Then, I'm afraid, they left her to her fate in their frantic desire to extricate me in time."

"Well, it will be most interesting to know how and why she went back to the lodge after leaving it. Your men were neither of them within reach?"

"Unfortunately, no. They have felt it terribly; but I can hardly blame them. From the moment we landed in England—I should say, from the moment we crossed the Italian frontier—there had been nothing at all to excite suspicion. The police, both in London and here in Martershire, were on the alert. No suspicious strangers were known to be about. I was within my own grounds, and the two men, who had had a long, tiring day, were having some tea. The chauffeur was just going off to take my wife to this imaginary meeting at Great

Lanefield, and then there came a bogus police call for Adney, which very nearly sent him off on a fool's errand to Marterstead. I can most truly say that no faintest suspicion of the *bona fides* of my tenants had ever entered my head."

"I hear they are to be extradited?"

"Both the women. They are badly wanted by the New York police. The man will be brought to trial here, and had Valery died as the result of his shot would have been hanged. As it is, he will probably get a severe sentence. The trio have operated together for some years. They had no personal grudge against me. They were running a gambling saloon in Algiers, having made New York too hot to hold them, when the Halis bribed them to arrange this business. I fancy this will be the end of it."

"Your constituency devoutly hopes so," laughed Sir George.

From the moment of being assured of Carfrae's safety, Valery made steady, and at first incredibly swift, progress towards recovery.

While her life hung in the balance Caron was with her continually, except for those hours which were given to sleep and a walk. From the time of his first going into her room there was, however, practically no doubt of the issue. At the end of three or four days she was strong enough for him to venture to leave her.

She was quite able to understand and to appreciate the fact that he must go to London to take his seat

in the House. He had to be in his place constantly during the remainder of the session, which was a stormy one; and was often kept very late. He always, however, made a point of returning to Archwood once in every twenty-four hours, even though sometimes it was three o'clock in the morning when Baker drove the car into the gates.

In spite of fatigue and late hours, he always contrived to look fresh and smiling when he came into the sick-room for his daily glimpse of the convalescent. His press of work was, however, formidable, so that it was always a brief visit. Lyndsay was also kept so completely occupied with the voluminous correspondence of the new member, that he likewise had but fleeting peeps at the new Valery with the bobbed hair, who looked so strangely younger, shyer, softer than the Oxford undergraduate had been wont to appear.

To Carfrae it seemed as if that session would never end. His interest in his new work and his new surroundings was keen, but the undercurrent of tremendous excitement, resolutely held in check, chafed and strained him. He knew that he must wait and possess his soul in patience, until such time as he himself should be free to give his whole consideration to the question of Valery's future; and also until she herself was strong enough to face the situation with something of her old grip.

He lived through those days, his maiden days in Parliament, as if in a dream, of which the most dream-like and unreal moments were those in which

he tapped at the brass knocker on Valery's door—she had been taken up to the old nurseries as soon as she was well enough to express the wish to be moved—and was admitted to the room wherein he had once been so mercilessly snubbed, and ordered not to trespass there again.

She little knew the effort it cost him to hold, during these brief interviews, to the attitude of affectionate teasing which had been so successful in pulling her back from the very brink of the grave. He seldom came empty-handed, bringing home turtle soup for her, or some new and special dainty to tempt her appetite. He ordered oysters, he purchased cushions with a special eye to the colouring of her room; and as her recovery progressed he procured a wonderful patent garden couch, with a canopy, for her use in the garden. He did all that a man could to make his devotion plain; but he was never serious. In fact, he loved to make Val laugh; and at first this was not easy.

As she grew stronger her self-possession returned to her. At first she did not quite know how to take him, but soon she had accepted and adopted the new terms, much as she had done when she came back to him before.

Often he lost himself in speculation as to her real feelings towards him. Lyndsay had said she was in love with him. When he recalled the scene between them which had taken place in that very room where now he sat beside her sofa, a welcome guest, he felt far from certain that Lyndsay was right. Most undeniably she had begun to revive, had come back

from the very brink of the grave, as soon as she knew that he lived; but he could not rid himself of the torturing doubt lest this might be really due to her intense desire to make good her word and see him safely elected to Parliament. He remembered how, on the way home from the Lufton meeting, she had frozen him with the intimation that what she had then said had been spoken in pursuance of the agreement that she was to do all she could to get him returned for the division. He remembered her indignation when he had told her she had better leave the house; how she had said he should not let her down after all the trouble she was taking for him. Her pleasure at the sight of him whom she supposed to have been murdered might be due—leaving out of account the natural relief of a sensitive girl who finds that murder has not been done—to her triumph in having succeeded in saving the life of the man who had injured her and for whom she had in return done so much.

As she regained her health and her mental poise these doubts assailed him with more force. Carefully he skirted away from any, even the vaguest, allusions to the future—from anything which might give her a chance to stab him with some mention of her own plans, exclusive of his.

So the days wore on until the dawn of that one which found him a free man. The House had adjourned; the boys were coming home the following day for their holidays; and it was Valery's twenty-third birthday.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE FINAL ARRANGEMENT

CARON opened his eyes that summer morning with the sense that the moment had come when things must be set upon a definite footing.

The gardens of his old home lay steeped in sunshine and glowing with colour. The Madonna lilies stood up against the dark yew hedges in pure contrast with the flaming montbretias and the larkspurs and dahlias. As he leaned from his window it seemed to him that he breathed incense.

His home! Would it be really his? He recalled his childhood there—his lonely childhood, for he had had no brothers and sisters. His father was elderly and invalidish, his mother beautiful and worldly. She made a second marriage, went to India with her husband, died there. . . .

He travelled back in thought along the road of his own life. How completely unreflecting, how blindly optimistic he had been! When he met Blanche Eldrid, and her shadowy beauty turned his youthful head, there had been no need to consult anything but his own desires. He married her in a rush of passion, and before he realised what had happened he found himself husband and father, tied for life to a woman for whom he felt first irritation, then indifference, then dislike, which approached

by stealthy degrees to something that resembled loathing.

She had lived in the house—had filled it with people he hated. She had left him to solitude in India while she lounged her life away in the garden or the drawing-room, immersed in contemplation of her wonderful self.

How he had hated his furloughs! How he had detested coming back to England!

And now?

He knew that if the girl upstairs in his old nurseries would open her arms and take him in he could be happy for the first time in his life; happy in his home, in his place where he belonged. His whole being craved for Val as if he had been a boy. No; it was incredible. Such happiness could not be for him. As he lay in the filthy dungeon at Hal-i-Mor, or in the hot hospital at Tahoura, tortured by flies, how he had longed for the sight of these lawns, these spreading oaks and dark cedars. He had wished with all the strength of his heart that he had not to take Valery with them.

Now all his hopes and fears and cravings were focused upon the question of whether or no she could care for him—could forget the years that sundered them and give him what he had never in all his starved life possessed.

As he thought of the expressive face which had come to mean so much to him that it blocked out all else, he grew hot all over with the force of his longing for the love of this girl.

The sound of the breakfast bell drew him downstairs, and Kirdles looked up from her coffee-pot with a gleam of approval as she saw that he was in white flannels.

"Come," said she, "this looks like holiday time!"

Caron came round the table, bent his head, and kissed her forehead with a gesture that well became him. "Wish me luck," he said hoarsely.

She turned up her kind face to his. They were alone, for punctuality at meals was not in the long list of Lyn's virtues.

"I do wish you luck," she said kindly; but he detected a note of anxiety in her voice.

"You are on my side, Kirdles?" he asked wistfully.

"Yes, I am now," she said slowly. "I thought I never should be. I was prepared to go to any length to get her away from you; but now——"

"Yet you are not sure?" he asked, looking down and growing red. "I mean, you don't know what she feels—what she'll be likely to say to me?"

Kirdles desisted from her occupation and leaned back in her chair with knit brow. "I think," said she slowly, "that it will be touch and go. . . ."

"You mean that she herself is not certain; that she has not really forgiven me; that she—er—might say 'yes' from a sense of duty . . . ?"

"Oh, no," said Kirdles quickly, "not that. No sense of duty will compel her. . . ."

"And yet," he objected, "a sense of duty did

bring her back to help me; she came back because she thought she ought to come."

Kirdles slowly shook her head. "Not exactly. She came because she was sorry for you. She thought that she was putting you in a tight corner, and to her there was something mean in wreaking vengeance on you. Lyndsay made her see that she would be doing you far more harm than you had done her."

"Oh! Lyndsay made her see it, did he?"

"Yes. He understands her in a wonderful way."

Caron did not reply. He seated himself and helped himself to food with a desponding air.

Quite suddenly he was face to face with a possibility of whose existence he had all along been subconsciously aware, but whose gravity he had hitherto declined to consider.

Was it Lyndsay, after all?

Had Valery returned to duty because Lyndsay went and fetched her? Had her anxiety over his own life been, as he suspected, only because she had undertaken to help him to success and could not bear that her efforts should fail?

The light went out of the broad blue skies and his heart sank.

Kirdles, looking at him, wavered in her mind. Should she or should she not tell him that in her opinion everything hung upon himself—upon the way in which he approached Valery?

She guessed a great deal of what was passing in the girl's mind, and how difficult she was finding it

to believe that this man could honestly and whole-heartedly be her lover. As Kirdles surmised, she was arguing something like this:

Carfrah found himself at home and married. His wife was good to look at, and above the average in intelligence. She was popular in the county. His house was the perfection of comfort and good management; his children in the hands of a most capable woman. If Valery went out of his life all this well-being must cease. He would be once more, as three years ago, a helpless widower with a family of children, to whom he was more or less a stranger.

All this Valery must perceive, and its force must be recognised. In a word, her husband might well desire reconciliation with her in order to make the present state of things permanent; and this she could not bear. She had resigned for him her freedom, her university hopes, her pride, and her happiness. Herself she would not give, unless he loved her.

Miss Kirby dared not put this before him. She felt the situation too delicate, too critical, for it to be wise for her to meddle. If the man loved Valery he must be trusted to make her know it, and to do so in his own way. When she was at the point of death, when everything but what was fundamental was out of sight, he had recalled her to life. Now that shades of the prison-house had once more collected—that they were both back in a modern world—the matter was more complicated; but if it was still to him vital he ought to triumph.

Yet was it as she had warned him, touch and go. Dimly Miss Kirby felt that if he missed his chance that day it would be final. Studying his face, guarded though his expression habitually was, and little as he gave himself away, she judged him to be fully aware of the gravity of the occasion.

Lyn came hurling himself into the room before she could say another word. He was in good spirits, for he had been working almost, if not quite, as hard as Carfrae, and was now eager as a boy for holidays. Yet it was impossible to make plans, for all that Carfrae would say was that he had not yet consulted Val.

"Well, you'd better be quick, for those young savages will be down on us like the wolf on the fold to-morrow," observed Lyn, pouring cream on his porridge so lavishly that Kirdles took away the ewer and rebuked him. "You've got to go to Marter-stead this morning and meet the organising committee," he went on ruthlessly. "The celebrated Bart. and M.P. must do his devoirs; but after that you ought to get some time off, I really think. Ever since you came home you've been on the go."

"Yes," said Carfrae mutinously, "and I've had about enough of your driving, young feller-me-lad. You can ring up the committee, and say that the Bart. has no intention whatever of changing his clothes in order to attend their fool meeting, but will deputise his secretary to do this for him while he lazes about at home."

This, however, Lyndsay would not allow. "Get

it over," he urged; "it won't take long, and then you're free. Val won't appear before lunch to-day, because you know the Bowyers and the Hather-leghs are coming to dinner in honour of her birthday; but if you're a good lad you shall have the afternoon with her in the garden. So do as you're told this morning, and Adney can replace you inside that most becoming set of flannels after lunch."

Carfrae threw his bread at the speaker, but yielded the point. After all, if he won this afternoon it would be best to have the morrow quite free. For a moment he pictured a dazzling possibility—himself and Valery side by side in the car, driving off together into the unknown; to some destination; anywhere—anywhere out of the world, wherein they might begin to realise each other.

Yet the very improbability of such a journey, when he came to formulate it, accentuated his depression. What was he that such delight should await him? How should she know that inside his tropic-hardened skin and that dry official manner, which was so hard to shake off, was the heart of a boy, longing for hers?

He was far from being his own master that afternoon as he sauntered down the garden, along the paved, yew-bordered walk to where Valery was installed in the circular space at the end, by the sundial, in the chair he had so carefully chosen for her.

It was folded up into a real chair that afternoon, and Val was sitting, not reclining in it. She looked

up from her book as he came sauntering towards her between the lilies, the delphiniums and the alstrœmerias.

He had gone back into his flannels and wore no hat. The light breeze just lifted the dull gold of his hair.

"Oh," said Val, smiling with her usual air of camaraderie, "how jolly to see you look like that! No more Westminster for the present."

"No." He dropped into the chair which stood beside her and from which she pushed old Trash, now quite a veteran, to make room for him. "I'm a free man at last," he said. "Free to attend to your affairs, my dear girl." He flattered himself that his tones contained no hint of the excitement that devoured him.

She made no answer, but he heard her catch her breath, and imagined an inaudible, "Now for it!"

"I think you know," he began slowly, "that I have left things as they are for the past month, not because I considered Parliamentary affairs more urgent than your future, but because you have manifestly not been equal to business. In consequence, I haven't yet so much as thanked you for all that you have done for me."

She made a murmur of deprecation—rather a vehement one—sitting up as though she would like to bolt out of reach of inconvenient gratitude. He laid his hand upon her arm and held it lightly.

"Steady on; this has got to be said, you know. It's not merely what you have done during the past

few months; culminating in your having risked your life—almost given it—for mine. It's what you have done all the while I have been away from home. Your goodness to my children; your loyalty; your heroic bearing of an almost unbearable situation. I haven't a word to say for myself. I dealt you a rotten hand, poor child; my only excuse is that I didn't realise what a rotten hand it was. But I'm not going to make excuses. The only reason I mention it is to emphasise the point that, in view of what I owe to you, it stands to reason that nothing I could do for you now would be too much."

She made no reply. Her eyes were upon the muscular limb which lay over the arm of her chair. It was bare to the elbow, for Carfrae had been playing a set of tennis with Lyndsay. Never before had she seen it so, for it was usually concealed beneath faultless shirt-cuffs. All round the wrist was a band, more than two inches wide, of darkened, discoloured flesh, seamed and scarred with healed sores—the unfading memorial of his manacles. The actual sight of that silent witness to the torture he had borne affected her deeply. He had no idea at all of the way in which those wounds—"poor, poor dumb mouths"—were speaking for him. After a slight pause, which she made no attempt to fill, he went on:

"Nothing could be too much; and I want you to understand that I actually mean what I say. I am not talking figuratively. I shall accept whatever you deal out to me. I have no rights. I can urge no

claims upon you. If you say you are going away to leave me for ever, I shall do my best to submit even to that. The trouble is that, as far as the law goes, it isn't going to be so easy to set you free."

Under his lids he watched her narrowly as he spoke. He was almost sure that he was saying what she had not expected him to say. Her expression changed slightly. He took out his cigarette-case to give her a chance to let his words sink in. "May I smoke?" he asked politely, and said no more until he had lit his cigarette.

"I went the other day," said he presently, "to my own lawyer, to consult him about this nullity business, putting the case as if it had to do with someone else. There are various grounds upon which such a suit may be brought, but the only one that can be put forward as between you and me, is the ground of fraud or mistake. Your contention is that you married me under a mistake, and upon that ground you plead to be set at liberty. That being so, it is you from whom the application must proceed—not me."

She had still no remark to make, and after awaiting one for a few moments he went on:

"Unfortunately, we are both so much in the public eye that we must be prepared for publicity. As you know, I dislike that, partly on my own account, but far more on yours. However, I want you to know that if you insist I shall submit. You can go ahead; and if they hoof me out of the constituency

I shall take it as my just punishment. But there is a point upon which I would like to make myself clear before going on to put before you the fact which would, I fear, render a suit for nullity impossible——”

“Impossible?”

“Yes, we’ll come to that directly. What I want first to assure you of is this: that if it is still your fixed determination to leave me, you can trust me to respect your decision without any decree of the courts. If you tell me to stand out, I stand out. That I swear solemnly to you. You may go where you choose, and I’ll not trouble you. The flaw in that plan is, of course, that legally you will not be free. So that perhaps”—he hesitated a long time, holding his smoking cigarette before his eyes, and staring at it as though it interested him profoundly—“perhaps you will wish not to make a decision until you have had time to—er—consult Lyndsay?”

“*Lyndsay?*” echoed Valery in accents of sharp surprise. “What on earth has Lyndsay to do with it?”

Carfrae turned scarlet. Through all his frame ran a throb of sheer gladness. He was so moved that for a moment he could not reply; and after seeking about in her mind for some reason for the introduction of Lyn’s name, Val said hurriedly:

“Is it because he went to Grendon and fetched me back, that you think I rely so much upon his judgment as to shape my whole future by it? It was not Lyn himself, but what he told me, that de-

cided me to do as I did. I had not realised what my going away would mean. He made me see that I was putting you in the worst kind of hole; but he was not responsible for my choice."

Caron raised his head and expanded his lungs in a deep breath. So far was Valery from loving Lyndsay that she did not even understand the suggestion which underlay her husband's words. The man's heart began to beat so heavily that he himself was astonished at the physical effect of his emotion.

"I see," he replied; and for a long moment said no more.

Valery, too, was silent awhile, sensing the impact of something formidable. At last she said falteringly, "Will you tell me, please, why you say I cannot be legally free? What is the circumstance that makes it impossible?"

He dropped his cigarette on the grass and set his foot on it. Then, leaning forward, he turned to her. "The only ground upon which you could sue has disappeared."

That drew her eyes to meet his own, though she could not face what she saw there for more than a second. "Explain, please," she stammered.

"Sure you want me to?" meaningly.

Again her lids rose, and again they fell in confusion.

"Of course I do."

"Pretty obvious, isn't it? The reason appears to be so well known to everybody, not merely in

this house, but also in this constituency, that it seems odd you should be ignorant of it. You say you married me under the impression that I loved you. I mean that is what you will have to plead as your reason—that you supposed I loved you, and subsequently discovered that I did not. They will doubtless proceed to ask me whether it is true that I do not love you; and I shall have either to perjure myself or to confess that I love you to distraction, and that if you leave me I shall be absolutely and utterly wretched."

Val sat in utter silence, hoping he could not hear her heart beat. She did not look up.

"Well," he asked at last, "what about it, Val? Are you going to tell me to commit perjury? If you order it I must sink even to that; but I'd much—rather—not."

Very low, under her breath she hurriedly murmured, "Why not go on as we are for a year, as we arranged?"

"No, Val. Can't be done. Sorry, but it can't. If you remember my outbreak the day before your accident—do you remember it, by the way?"

"Yes," . . . hardly audible.

"Then I should have thought you would know better than to suggest such a thing. I want you for my own; and if you won't—well, then, my dear, I must get away to some place where I can neither see nor hear you. I'm at the end of my tether."

There was no reply. He leaned forward, to try and look into the obstinately lowered eyes. His

mouth almost touched her hair. "Val, what made you turn back that day after we had parted in the park? What brought you back to Dairy Lodge? Answer me, please."

"I . . . suddenly realised that you were in danger."

"What did that matter to you? If they had got me you would have been free—rid of me for ever! Wouldn't that have been splendid?"

He was too near—too dominating for her. Her calm broke up suddenly. "Oh, Car, don't be *silly!* You talk nonsense; you don't mean it—you don't—you can't! You don't really love me. . . ."

She sprang to her feet, with the impulse to flee. He rose also, caught her, held her, with a grip so determined that she knew she could not escape until he willed it.

Words came tumbling from her in passionate incoherence. "It is not—is not really—love! It is just that you think it wiser to be friends. You want to make the best of a bad job, and you are—so—correct—you would like to make friends. . . . Oh"—as she struggled to evade his eager mouth—"I will not submit, I will *not!* I am free—yes, I *am* free, whatever you say." Then, as he had his way and his kiss held her a long moment quiveringly silent, she added a cry of pitiful surrender. "Oh, if it were not real, this time, what would become of me?"

"Val," he gasped between laughter and tears,

"don't be a little fool! Can't you *feel*—don't you *know*—that it's the real thing this time? Didn't you know it when I made a scene in the old nursery? Can you look me in the eyes and say you didn't know it when I called you back from death? Why, Val, if it were not for me you'd be dead at this moment. You're my conquest—the spoils of victory! Do you imagine I am going to let my prize escape me? Why do you suppose I called you back, but because I couldn't live without you?"

Lyndsay sat by the tea-table in the garden, admiring the magnificent iced cake which the cook had prepared to do honour to her ladyship's birthday.

Kirdles had strolled down the yew-walk to tell Val that tea was ready. She now came into sight hurriedly, almost running, her cheeks scarlet, her eyes swimming.

"Hallo, old dear, what's up?" asked Lyn, quite startled.

Kirdles sank into a chair, and fumbled for a handkerchief to wipe away the tears which were running from her eyes.

"It's all right," she sobbed, and for a minute could add no more. Then she reiterated, "Thank God, it's all right. I've just seen them. Too beautiful! Too perfect! Thank God, I gave the right advice, after all! My dear, this isn't Val's birthday. It's her *wedding-day!*"

Lyndsay sprang from his seat at her words, and

turned his back upon her; but it was not many minutes before he once more reseated himself, facing the world anew.

“Her happiness comes before all,” he said quietly.

THE END

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